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MIKE SHAYNE
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY, 1961 Vol. 9, No. 2

COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVEL

CASE OF THE BEAUTIFUL BODY
by KELLY ROOS

The painting was that of a very beautiful woman. But there was something chillingly disturbing about it. Stranger still were the murders it seemed almost to foreshadow. . . . . . 60 to 114

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Murder Over Miami

THE NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

by Brett Halliday

The crime threw Shayne off-balance in an emotional way . . . because it hurt him where he was most vulnerable. But that was very bad news for a vicious killer as well.

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE arrived at his Flagler Street office at ten A.M. on Monday, he was surprised to find the door locked. Opening it with his own key, his gaze swept the anteroom. Beyond the wooden railing Lucy Hamilton's typewriter was still covered and her posture chair was shoved into the well of her desk, so that the back rest touched the edge of the desk.

His secretary always left the office meticulously neat before she went home.

Puzzled, the redhead crossed the anteroom to his private office, glanced in, then returned to Lucy's desk. His shaggy eyebrows pulled into a frown and he tugged at his left earlobe. It was completely out

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MIKE SHAYNE HAS NEVER BEEN SO TOUGH—OR SO ANGRY.

of character for Lucy to be late. Shayne could never remember her failing to have the office open promptly at nine A.M.

Lifting Lucy's desk phone, he dialed her home number. He let it ring eight times before hanging up. He stood frowning for a moment more, then strode from the office and let the lock click shut behind him.

He drove directly to the apartment house where Lucy lived. As he went past the bank of mailboxes in the lobby, he pressed her doorbell button without slowing down, then long-legged it up the half flight of stairs to her first-floor apartment.

Even if she had been home, Lucy wouldn't have had time to get to the door before Shayne reached it. His hand twisted the knob, found the door unlocked and pushed it open.

He paused in the doorway, staring about the room, his worried gaze taking in every detail almost instantaneously. The front room was as neat and orderly as it always was.

Crossing to the kitchenette, he glanced in, then turned to the bedroom. He frowned when he saw the unmade bed, the imprint of Lucy's head clearly visible in one of the pillows. With Lucy's neat habits, it was as out of character for her to leave an unmade bed as it was for her to be late for work.

Then he saw the note lying on the dresser. Crossing the room, he picked it up.

It was a single, unfolded sheet of ordinary typewriting paper. The message, scrawled in pencil, read:

Shayne:

Figured you'd be along to check on Brown Eyes. Don't bother going to the cops. You'll hear from me if you stick by your office phone. Play ball and you'll get her back in one piece. Bring in the law and you get her a piece at a time.

In remembrance of old times,

LEW.

The redhead stared at the note for a long time, his expression a mixture of puzzlement and growing rage. His left hand tugged irritably at his earlobe as his mind searched back in time for someone named Lew. Then, suddenly, it clicked.

"Lew Grant," he said aloud.

Folding the note, he thrust it into his inside coat pocket, took one long stride to the bedside phone. His cheeks were trenched with anger as he dialed.

"Police, Sergeant Harris," a laconic voice said in his ear.

"This is Mike Shayne," the redhead snapped. "Chief Gentry in?"

"Yeah, Mike. Hang on."

A moment later Chief Will Gentry's heavy voice said, "Morning, Mike. What's up?"

"I want you to check something in New Orleans for me, Will. And I need it fast. Can you use the phone instead of wiring?"

"All right," Gentry said agreeably. "What is it?"

"Remember a couple of local extortionists named Lewis Grant and Art Neisner?"

"Yeah," the chief said slowly. "We heard a rumor down here that Neisner tried to move back into town a few weeks ago, and you tied a can to his tail. I've been meaning to talk to you about it."

"That can wait for now," Shayne said impatiently. "If you'll recall, the two of them tried to muscle in on New Orleans about six years ago, when the protection racket got too tight for them here. Grant burned a New Orleans merchant who refused to pay protection, and his widow engaged me to investigate the murder. Art Neisner wasn't in on the kill and wanted no part of his trigger-happy partner after that. He got off the conspiracy hook by turning state's evidence. Grant was declared batty and committed to the state hospital for the criminally insane."

"Uh-huh. Just what happened between you and Neisner a couple of weeks back, Mike?"

"Do we have to go into it now?" Shayne demanded.

"Can you think of a better time?" Gentry inquired reasonably.

"All right," the redhead said irritably. "I got a tip that Neisner was back in town contacting some local strong-arm boys to reorganize his old racket. We had a conversation and he went back to New Orleans."

"Some conversation," the chief said dourly. "I hear he had to be carried onto the train. Mike, you can't go around beating up private citizens, even if they're hoods. If he'd made a complaint, I would have had to pull you in for assault and battery."

"Nuts," Shayne said. "When did I ever swing first even at a hood? He pulled a knife and I made him eat it."

"Oh?" Gentry said. "I didn't hear that part. I got it that you pushed him around just to get across your point. It didn't sound like you."

"Then why'd you believe it?" Shayne snapped. "I haven't time to discuss this nonsense now, Will. Get on the phone and find out if Lew Grant is still in the nut factory. I'm at Lucy's place right now, but I'm leaving for my office. Will you meet me there as soon as you get the dope?"

"Why can't you come here?"

"Because I have to stick at my office to wait for a phone call, Will. Believe me, it's important. I'll explain things when you get to my office."

"All right, Mike," Gentry said heavily. "See you shortly."

Will Gentry arrived at the Flagler Street office ten minutes after Shayne did. He found the redhead pacing the floor of the anteroom, angrily puffing a cigarette.

"Where's Lucy?" the chief asked, glancing at the still-covered typewriter beyond the wooden railing.

Ignoring the question, Shayne asked, "What about Grant?"

The police chief's burly form moved to one of the client's chairs against the wall and sank heavily into it. "Escaped from the mental hospital four days ago," he said. "Put a guard in the critical ward with a fractured skull, took off in a hospital laundry truck. The truck was found abandoned in New Orleans the next day. They've had the town bottled up ever since, so they think he's still hiding out there."

Shayne snorted. Withdrawing the folded note from his pocket, he passed it to Gentry. The chief's lips tightened and a worried look came into his eyes as he read the note.

"You think Grant wrote this?" Gentry asked.

"He's the only Lew I can think of who might hold a grudge," the detective growled. "Also the only one nuts enough to pull a snatch."

"You found this at Lucy's place, huh? What happened? You check there when she didn't show for work?"

Shayne nodded. "No sign of a struggle. Her bed wasn't made, but otherwise there wasn't a thing out of place. He must have walked in with a gun and forced her to go along on her feet. Probably he showed in the middle of the night and caught her in bed."

"Last night, you think?"

Shayne gave a hopeless shrug. "I wasn't in contact with her over the week-end. It could have been Friday night, Saturday night or last night."

Gentry refolded the note and thrust it into a pocket. "Grant never took a fall here, but he must have a thick file in New Orleans. I'll get on the phone again and have them send a sample of his

handwriting. We'll have a handwriting expert check it against this note. Meanwhile we'd better inform the FBI."

"The devil we will," Shayne said in a definite tone. "We won't make a move until he phones. I'm not getting Lucy killed."

The chief frowned. "They're pretty efficient on kidnappings, Mike. And they move carefully. They won't risk her life."

"Any action might risk her life. This is no kidnapping for ransom, Will. This guy's a maniac."

Gentry asked, "If it's not for ransom, what's he want? The note sounds as though he's going to phone instructions."

"He wants me," Shayne said bitterly. "He wants revenge for being put away. Lucy is just the bait to make me come to him under his own terms."

After considering this, the chief slowly nodded his head. "You've probably hit it. So what are you going to do when he phones?"

"Meet his terms."

Gentry's frown deepened. "You mean just walk into his trap and let him burn you down?"

"Walk into his trap," Shayne said grimly. "I'll worry about getting burned after I get there."

II

BEFORE GENTRY LEFT, he got Shayne to agree to let him put a tap on the office phone, so that any call from the kidnapper could be traced. But otherwise the redhead refused to let him take any action which might in any way alarm the kidnapper. Knowing Lew Grant's unstable mind, he was afraid that the slightest suspicion that the police had been informed would cause him to kill Lucy.

The rest of the morning Shayne simply waited by the phone. Shortly before noon a pair of plain-clothes men showed to connect the phone tap. Since Shayne didn't want them sitting around his office, they ran a line to a vacant office up the hall and set up their tape recorder there.

At noon he phoned a nearby restaurant and had a sandwich and coffee delivered. Then he continued to sit at his desk and wait.

Inaction of any kind galled the redhead. But in this case there was absolutely nothing to do but wait. By three P.M. he had killed a half bottle of cognac and had gone through two packages of cigarettes. He wasn't in a pleasant mood when he heard someone walk into the anteroom. The caller had a heavy tread.

Rising from his desk, he walked to the door to the anteroom and let his eyes glitter at his visitor. The man was tall and broadly built, with finely chiseled features and wavy blond hair. Defensively he raised a hand palm outward

when he saw the redhead's expression.

"I didn't come back to town under my own power, Shayne," he said quickly. "I was forced to come back. I'm here to do you a favor."

The glitter remained in the Shayne's eyes, but he gave the man a curt nod. "All right, Neisner. What kind of favor?"

"A tip. My old partner, Lew Grant, broke out of the mental hospital and is out to get you."

Shayne gave him a bleak smile. "Why would you care?"

"I don't," Art Neisner admitted frankly. "But I don't want to be tagged as an accessory either. And I flew him here from New Orleans in my private plane. That's the truth, Shayne."

After coldly examining the man for a moment, Shayne motioned him into his private office, turned and went back to his desk. Neisner followed him into the room with a cautious air, gingerly seated himself on the edge of a chair.

"I want to clear myself of any responsibility for whatever Lew's done, or is planning to do," Neisner said. "When I leave here, I'm going to the police and repeat my story."

"Why not them first?" Shayne inquired frigidly.

"Because you're Lew's target. I thought you ought to be warned as soon as possible. I couldn't get here any sooner because I've been stranded on an island since Friday morning."

Shayne gave him a disbelieving look. "You don't look much the worse for wear."

"You should have seen me a couple of hours ago. I've just had a bath and shave in a hotel room while the valet service was pressing my suit."

"All right," Shayne said. "Get on with it."

Art Neisner took out a handkerchief, wiped his palms with it and put it away again. "Lew must have broken out Thursday night. I don't know the details, because I haven't had a chance to read a paper or listen to a radio since. Except the plane radio, of course, and all that comes over that is flight instructions. Lew didn't tell me how he made the break."

"You can skip the preliminaries," Shayne said with impatience.

"Well, he showed at my apartment in New Orleans around midnight last Thursday. I don't know where he got the gun, but he had one. At first I thought he'd come to kill me. He had a grudge because I turned state's evidence six years ago, you know."

Shayne made no comment.

"I guess his grudge against you was bigger," Neisner went on. "He didn't even seem mad at me. Just definite in what he wanted. He would have killed me if I hadn't gone along, though. He's nuttier than a pecan roll."

"So you acted under duress," the redhead grated. "I'll stipulate that, if it makes you feel better. What did he want you to do?"

"Fly him to Miami. He knew I owned a one-engine two-seater I keep at a little private airport just outside of town. He forced me to drive him out there. It was an illegal takeoff, because he wouldn't let me file a flight plan, or even tell the control officer I was taking off. We just climbed into the plane and I put it up. I don't think anyone saw the takeoff, because no inquiry came over the radio asking what the devil I thought I was doing."

"How come the control officer didn't see you? Or at least hear you?"

"He was probably asleep. This is a private airport supported by the plane owners. The night control officer sleeps in the control tower so that he can hear the radio in case somebody wants to make an emergency landing. But that hardly ever happens, and since none of us do much night flying, it would be silly to make him stay awake all night. On the rare occasion some owner does want to go up at night, he wakes him up to file a plan. At one thirty in the morning he would have been sound asleep. So the control tower didn't even know we were gone."

"I see," Shayne grunted. "Then what?"

"Lew ordered me to head for

Miami. I would have tried to stall him by saying I didn't have that much range, but he used to have a pilot's license too and knows as much about planes as I do. So I headed out over the gulf and flew non-stop over water all the way."

The redhead hiked shaggy eyebrows. "Your plane has that kind of range? It's close to nine hundred miles from New Orleans to here."

"By road," Neisner agreed. "Less than seven hundred as the crow flies. My plane's a Beach Bonanza with a special tank which gives me a thousand-mile cruising range. It cruises at two hundred plus, so we were looking down at Miami's lights by four-thirty A.M. Lew ordered me to turn south to a small, uninhabited key we both knew, because we used to fish off of it years back when we lived here. I landed on the beach by

moonlight. It was a ticklish landing, but I didn't have any choice with a gun sticking in my ear. I made it all right, but I hit a hole in the sand just as I was braking to a halt and busted a wheel. Lew was madder than the devil."

"Why?" Shayne inquired.

"I guess he planned to use the plane to get out of the country after completing his business down here. By then it was low on gas, of course, but he could have gotten hold of a boat and brought gas from the mainland. Anyway he bawled hell out of me for being clumsy. After we both examined the wheel and saw it couldn't be fixed, he went into a think session."

"He come to some decision?"

"Yeah," Neisner said with a slight shudder. "He decided to kill me."

"Oh?" Shayne said with raised brows. "Just like that?"

"Just like that. He explained that it was nothing personal, but he couldn't afford just to strand me on the island, because I might get off before he finished his business and blow the whistle on him. He'd already told me he meant to kill you, and he didn't want you warned. While he was giving me this logical explanation, I made my break."

"You jumped him?"

"Hell no," Neisner said with an expression on his face suggesting he considered such an action would have been suicide. "I dived beneath the plane, came out on the other side and ran like a rabbit for the jungle edging the beach. By the time he got around on my side of the plane, I was thirty yards away. He threw a couple of shots after me, but missed. Then I was in the undergrowth. He didn't even bother to come after me."

"Why was that?"

"In the dark he wouldn't have had a prayer of finding me in that mass of growth, and he knew it. So he decided to settle for stranding me and hoping I'd stay stranded until his business was finished. I watched as he pulled out the rubber life float and inflated it. He also took along both life preservers that I carry in the plane. The key we were on is only about two hundred yards from Jungle Key, which is connected by a feeder road to the causeway. The last I saw of him he was paddling the float toward Jungle Key."

Shayne examined the man broodingly. "If you only had two hundred yards of water to cross, why did it take you three days to do it?"

"I can't swim. And the uninhabited, jungle side of Jungle Key faces the key I was on, so there was no one I could signal. On Jungle Key everybody lives on one side of the island, you know."

The redhead nodded. "I know the place. I had a case there once. How'd you finally get off?"

"This morning I found an old rowboat washed up on the beach. It must have washed up last night, because I scoured that beach Friday, Saturday and Sunday without finding a thing that would float. There weren't any oars, but eventually I found an old board to use as a paddle and made it to Jungle Key."

Shayne asked, "What did you live on for three days? You hardly look starved."

"I carry a week's supply of emergency rations in the plane. When I got to Jungle Key, I plowed through the jungle to the inhabited side of the island, found a filling station and hired a kid to drive me into Miami."

Shayne opened a desk drawer, drew out a small pad and poised a pencil over it. "Where's the station and what's the kid's name?"

Art Neisner looked surprised. "You're going to check him?"

"Mister, I'm going to check everything you've said clear back to that New Orleans airport," Shayne informed him grimly.

The man looked puzzled, but he made no objection. With a shrug he said, "The station is on the main street, North Beach Drive. I don't recall what kind of gas it handled, but you won't have any trouble finding it. It's the only gas station on the island. The kid's name is George and he's about nineteen. I didn't ask his last name."

Shayne jotted this information down, tore off the sheet and thrust it into a pocket. He dropped the pad and pencil back into the desk drawer.

Then he asked, "You have any idea where Grant is now?"

Art Neisner shook his handsome head. "Not the slightest. I told you every last detail of what I know of the whole affair."

Shayne picked up his phone, waited a moment, then said, "Will one of you men step into my office?"

The man monitoring the line from the office up the hall grunted, "Sure, Shayne."

A few moments later he appeared in the office doorway.

Pointing a thumb at Art Neisner, Shayne said, "This guy has a story to tell Chief Gentry. Run

him over to headquarters. I'll brief Gentry by phone while you're en route."

"Sure," the man said cheerfully. "Let's go, mister."

III

AS THE TWO left the room, Shayne picked up the phone and dialed police headquarters. He asked for Chief Will Gentry.

When the redhead finished relaying Neisner's tale to Gentry, the chief said, "It doesn't give us much of a lead on where Grant is holding Lucy, does it? Unless you think he might take her to that key."

"He wouldn't chance that," Shayne said. "For all Grant knows, Neisner might have gotten off the island an hour after he himself did. He'd be afraid he might run into a swarm of cops if he returned there. I'm going down there to check, though. Can you furnish me a policewoman to stand by the phone here and make like my temporary secretary?"

"Sure, Mike. But if you're so sure Grant wouldn't try to return to the island, why go to all that bother? We can have the state police give it a routine check."

Shayne said, "I want to backtrack on Neisner's story to make sure he's telling the truth."

"You think he might not be?"

"Not really," the redhead said with a touch of impatience. "Why would he make up as wild a story as this? But with Lucy's life at stake, I'm not taking anything for granted. Will you get on the phone to New Orleans again and have them check out that airport to see if his plane actually took off without authorization? I want everything he's said checked all down the line."

"All right, Mike. I'll have a policewoman over there within twenty minutes, so you can take off. Phone me as soon as you get back, will you?"

"Sure, Will," Shayne said, and hung up.

The policewoman who arrived twenty minutes later was a robust blonde in her thirties. She looked strong enough to wrestle steers, but she had a remarkably sweet and feminine voice. She said her name was Nell Forshay.

Shayne asked if Gentry had briefed her on the situation.

"Yes, sir," she said. "I understand your secretary has been kidnapped and I'm to wait for a phone call from the kidnapper. The chief said you'd instruct me on what to say if a phone call came."

"You don't have to call me, sir," the redhead said. "My secretary calls me Michael, most other people Mike. Take your pick."

"All right, Mike," Nell Forshay said with a smile.

Shayne glanced at his watch. "Three forty-five, he said. "It's only a little over fifty miles to

Jungle Key, so I should be there by five P.M. I'll phone here as soon as I arrive. If anyone calls, say I'm out but am expected to phone in at five. Ask if you can take a message."

"Yes, sir," the policewoman said, then hurriedly amended it when the redhead gave her a pained look. "I mean okay, Mike. I'll try not to let it happen again."

Southbound traffic was unusually light on Highway One, so Shayne made good time even before he hit the causeway. Once on it, he was able to roll along at high speed without even slowing down. It was only ten of five when he reached Jungle Key.

He located the filling station without difficulty. As Art Neisner had said, it was on the main street and was the only one on the island.

Pulling in close to the building so as not to block the pumps, the detective climbed from the car. A middle-aged man in coveralls stepped outdoors and said, "Yes, sir?"

"George around?" Shayne asked.

"Washing up to go home," the attendant said. "He's off at five." He pointed through the glass front

window to a door marked: MEN. "You'll find him in there."

"I'll wait until he comes out," Shayne said. "Do you have a pay phone?"

The man pointed inside again to a wall phone next to the men's room door.

Moving into the building, Shayne fished coins from his pocket, dialed the operator and gave his office number in Miami. At her instruction, he dropped more coins.

When a soft feminine voice said, "Michael Shayne's office," the redhead said, "Just arrived here, Nell. Any calls?"

"Not the one you expected. A Mrs. Wilma Greene wants you to investigate the background of a visiting duke who is courting her daughter. She thinks he's a phony. And Acme Insurance called about a jewel theft. I told them both you'd phone them in the morning."

"Good girl," he told her. "I'll phone again about six."

As Shayne hung up, the men's room door opened and a tall, thin lad of about nineteen came out. The middle-aged attendant, who had followed Shayne inside, said. "This gentleman wants to see you, George."

A car pulled up outside that moment, and the middle-aged man hurried out to attend it. The boy glanced at the redhead and his eyes widened.

"Hey, aren't you Mike Shayne?" he inquired.

"Uh-huh," the redhead said, holding out his hand. "I don't know your last name, George."

The boy pumped his hand with enthusiasm. "Benedict, Mr. Shayne. George Benedict. Gee, I'm sure glad to meet you." Then his enthusiasm began to be tempered by puzzlement. "But why are you looking for me, Mr. Shayne?"

"Did you drive a man into Miami today, George?"

"Mr. Neisner, you mean?" George Benedict asked with raised brows. "Sure. He paid me ten bucks plus gas. Did I do something wrong?"

"Just making a routine check," Shayne reassured him. "What time was this?"

"We left about noon. He showed around eleven, but I was here alone and couldn't get away until I phoned Benny to come in and relieve me for a couple of hours. Benny's the guy outside."

"I see. What story did Neisner give you?"

"Was it a phony one?" the boy asked worriedly. "Did I help a criminal escape or something?"

"What's there to escape from around here?" Shayne inquired. "You didn't do anything wrong, George. What did he tell you?"

George looked relieved. "He said he cracked up his private

plane on Goat Key, just off the other side of the island, and had been stranded there for three days because he couldn't swim. He looked like he was telling the truth."

"How's that?"

"He had enough beard to back up his story. And his clothes were all wrinkled. He said he'd pushed through the jungle from the other side of the island."

The redhead gave his left earlobe a thoughtful tug. "Know where I can rent a boat to get over to Goat Key?" he asked.

"I've got a fifteen-footer with a thirty-five-horse outboard, Mr. Shayne. But you don't have to rent it. I'd be glad to run you over, if you're not going to stay too long. Mom will have supper on the table in an hour."

"That's fine," Shayne said. "I have to be back in an hour to make a phone call."

"Then let's go," George said.

The boy had an ancient Olds. Shayne followed in his own car. The Benedict home was a small cottage on the beach barely a half mile from the gas station. They pulled into a crushed coral drive which ran right past the cottage onto the beach, parked on the sand not twenty-five feet from the water.

A gray-haired woman came to the back door as they climbed from their cars. She gave George an inquiring look.

"This is Mr. Shayne, Mom," the boy called. "I've got to run him over to Goat Key, but we'll be back before six."

Shayne tipped his hat in the woman's direction and she threw him a vague smile across the intervening distance. She turned back into the house.

"My mother," the boy unnecessarily explained as they moved toward the water.

The boat was beached directly behind the cottage. It was a sleek inboard-outboard: that is, though powered by an outboard motor, it had front-seat controls and a steering wheel. The boy told Shayne to get aboard, then shoved on the prow and expertly leaped aboard without getting his feet wet.

The boat had a top speed of forty-five miles an hour. In less than ten minutes they had rounded the island and had landed on the smaller island behind it. Climbing out, they approached the small two-seater plane standing on the beach.

Shayne glanced at the pile of empty food tins strewn near the plane, then knelt to examine the broken wheel. After studying it carefully, he grunted and rose to his feet. His gaze traveled along the wheel tracks in the sand to the point where the plane had first touched down. Then he circled the machine, examining the sand on all sides of it.

But whereas the wheel tracks showed clearly, the sand was too loose and dry to show footprints. It was impossible to reconstruct what action had taken place near the plane, because it was impossible to determine which small depressions were footprints and which mere wind drifts.

Opening the plane's door, he climbed inside. On one wall there were four sets of clamps. One held a fire extinguisher, another a small fire axe, the other two were empty. Presumably they had held the folded, uninflated life raft and the two life jackets. Checking the storage compartment behind the seats, he found it empty.

As he started to climb out of the plane again, his eyes narrowed at a small hole in the door. Examining it closely, he saw that the hole passed entirely through the door and that the fabric on the outer side was pushed outward. Thoughtfully he tugged at his earlobe, puzzled. It had all the appearance of a bullet hole from a gun which had been fired inside the plane.

Then he glanced toward the jungle edging the beach and saw a possible explanation. The plane had slewed around when the wheel broke so that it faced the jungle. Probably the door had been left open when the men climbed out, and when Neisner broke and ran, one of Grant's wild shots had hit the open door.

With a shrug he said, "I guess that's all there is to see here, George. Let's go."

Instead of hading directly back toward the cottage, Shayne had the boy run him over to the jungle side of Jungle Key. There on the beach they found a battered scow with a piece of board lying on it. Nearby lay an inflated life raft with a paddle and two life preservers lying beside it.

"Checks out so far," the redhead muttered aloud. Then he asked, "George, did you run anyone else into Miami since last Friday?"

"No, sir. What do you mean?"

"Another man. There was one with Neisner when he landed. He used this raft. Have you heard of anyone on Jungle Key who drove anyone to Miami?"

George shook his head. Then a thought struck him. "Hey, old man Anderson had his car stolen Friday morning. They found it abandoned in Miami Saturday night and he had to go after it."

"Where's he live?"

"Just up the beach from me. I'll point out his place before we pull in."

"Fine," Shayne said. "We'd better get started back now."

IV

AS THEY NEARED the beach on the return trip, George Benedict pointed out a small red cottage a

few houses up the beach from his own.

Over the roar of the motor he shouted, "Old man Anderson's place."

The redhead merely nodded.

After they landed Shayne offered the boy a five-dollar bill for his trouble, but George refused to take it. Thrusting it into the lad's shirt pocket, Shayne reached out and rumpled his hair, grinned at him and walked away.

"You didn't have to, but many thanks," George called after him.

Climbing into his car, Shayne lifted one hand in a gesture of goodbye and backed down the crushed coral drive to the street.

The round trip to Goat Key had taken only forty minutes. Before phoning his office again, Shayne dropped by to see the man whose car had been stolen. He turned out to be a garralous old bachelor in his seventies who lived alone.

Anderson told him that his car had disappeared sometime Friday morning while he was out in a boat fishing, that he had reported it to the state police when he came in at noon, and it had been found abandoned in Miami Saturday night.

"What time did you go out fishing?" the redhead asked.

"Six A.M."

"So it was stolen between six A.M. and noon. Did any of the neighbors see it driving off?"

The old man shook his head. "Asked everybody. No strangers was seen prowling around. Funny, strangers are generally noticed."

The car was a blue 1954 Buick sedan. Shayne marked down the license number, thanked the old man and left.

Returning to the filling station, he phoned his office again. When Nell told him there had been no additional calls, he said he was starting back and she could expect him about seven.

When he walked into his Flagler Street office an hour later, Nell Forshay announced with suppressed excitement, "He finally phoned less than ten minutes ago, Mike. At least I think it was him. He wouldn't give his name."

"What did he say?" the detective asked sharply.

"He just asked for you. When I told him I expected you at seven, he said he'd call back and hung up."

Shayne frowned. "What makes you think it was the kidnapper?"

"In the first place I'm almost sure he was disguising his voice. It was a low, husky voice, but strained, as though he were deliberately making it low and husky. In the second place he was impatient and abrupt. I started to ask if he would leave a message, and he didn't even let me finish. He just growled that he'd call back and hung up." She added in a

tone of apology, "He wasn't on long enough for the boys up the hall to trace the call. They need about three minutes."

Shayne said, "We'll wait for him to call back. Meantime get me Will Gentry on the phone. If he's not at headquarters, try his home." Nell said, "He planned to stand by until you returned and phoned him."

Shayne moved into his private office as Nell picked up her phone. Seating himself behind his desk, he lit a cigarette and waited. A few moments later his phone buzzed and Nell's voice informed him that the chief of police was on the line.

"Sorry to make you work overtime, Will," Shayne said. "Did you get hold of New Orleans?"

"Yeah," Gentry said. "Neisner's story checks out at that end. His plane is listed as making an unauthorized takeoff sometime Thursday night or Friday morning and his car's still parked at the airport. How'd you make out?"

"Everything checked out just as he told it. I even found out how Grant got from Jungle Key to Miami. He stole a car."

"Oh? Got a description?"

"Yeah, but the owner has it back. It was found abandoned here in Miami Saturday night. It might be helpful to know just where. Maybe another car has been reported stolen from the same vicinity where this one was abandoned. It might give us a lead on what Grant's driving now."

"Give me the dope," the chief said. "I'll have it checked out."

Shayne relayed the description and license number of the stolen Buick.

"Phone you back as soon as I check it," Gentry said. "Meantime, I guess we'll have to release Neisner. I've been holding him in custody until I heard back from you."

"That further clears him of any involvement in this, then," the redhead growled. "Nell thinks the kidnapper phoned ten minutes before I got back."

"He did? What did he say?"

"That he'd phone again. I'd better hang up in case he's trying to call."

"Okay, Mike. I'll phone as soon as I get the dope on where the Buick was found."

Shayne had barely hung up when the phone buzzed again. Lifting it, he said, "Yes?"

"A call for you, Mr. Shayne," Nell's voice said primly.

Then a low, husky voice said in his ear, "Shayne?"

"Speaking."

The man emitted a chuckle. "Got a new secretary, I see. Won't Brown Eyes be jealous?"

Shayne was thinking back six years, trying to recall the voice of Lewis Grant and trying to fit it to

this one. It was no use. His caller was obviously disguising his natural voice. It might or might not be the voice of the man he had caused to be committed to a hospital for the criminally insane.

"What do you want?" Shayne said tightly.

"Brown Eyes sends her regards, Shayne. You'll find another note —at your apartment."

There was a click and the phone went dead.

The apologetic voice of one of the plain-clothesmen up the hall said, "Sorry, Mike, but he wasn't on long enough to trace the call."

"I know," Shayne said bitterly. "It takes three minutes." He slammed the phone back into its cradle.

Striding out into the anteroom, he said to the policewoman, "When Chief Gentry phones, ask him to call me at home. Then you may as well close up shop. He won't phone back tonight."

He was through the door and gone before she could reply.

Driving toward his apartment hotel, he cursed himself because it hadn't occurred to him that the kidnapper might deliver a note to his apartment. It was just the sort of devious thing Lew Grant would do after leaving instructions for Shayne to wait by his office phone. If he had waited at home instead of tearing off to Jungle Key, he might have caught the note deliverer in the act.

He was seething with rage when he entered the lobby of his apartment hotel, but you couldn't have told it by his expression, which was deadly calm. He went straight to the desk, where a well-groomed young man with sandy hair and a thin, intelligent face was on duty.

"Anything in my box, Jack?" Shayne inquired quietly.

The desk clerk glanced at the bank of mail boxes behind him, then shook his head. "Nothing today, Mr. Shayne."

"Has anyone inquired where my apartment is?"

Jack shook his head again.

"Thanks," Shayne growled, and headed for the elevator.

The note had been shoved under his door and lay just inside. Pushing the door shut behind him, Shayne picked it up.

Again it was a single sheet of typewriting paper. And again the message was scrawled in pencil. It read:

Shayne:

Brown Eyes is okay—so far. You can have her back by following instructions to the letter. Tomorrow draw

five thousand dollars from the bank in new fifty-dollar bills. Be at your apartment at ten-thirty tomorrow night and you'll get the next instructions.

For old time's sake,

LEW.

The phone rang.

Crossing the room, the detective picked it up and said harshly, "Shayne speaking."

"You sound mad," Chief Gentry's voice said. "What's up?"

"Another note," Shayne grated. "Shoved under my apartment door." Rapidly he read the contents of the note to Gentry.

"So it was a ransom demand after all," Gentry said slowly.

"Ransom, nuts," Shayne spat. "This is only a cover-up to make me walk into the trap with less suspicion. Whoever heard of a kidnapper asking for only five grand? And who ever heard of him wanting new fifties? If it was a bona fide ransom demand, he'd want old twenties and tens, not bills that can be traced. This is supposed to make me think I won't be in any personal danger when I deliver the loot."

After a moment of silence, Gentry said, "You may be right, Mike. Want us to stake out your apartment tomorrow night?"

"I don't want a cop within miles of here," Shayne said harshly. "I'll handle this myself. Don't get any ideas which might louse things up, Will. If this guy gets suspicious, he'll kill Lucy without a qualm."

"All right, Mike," the chief said soothingly. "We'll play it your way. Don't you even want your phone tapped?"

"No," the redhead said in a definite tone.

"Okay," Gentry said pacifically. "I checked on that Buick, Mike. It was found only a half block from Lucy's apartment."

"Oh?" Shayne said. "Any other cars reported missing from that area?"

"None reported missing from anywhere in the city that haven't been recovered. It was a good idea, but it looks like a dead end. Want to use Nell again tomorrow?"

"If you can spare her," Shayne said. "I have to have someone at the office to answer the phone, and it will save me a call to the employment office. Tell her I'll pay her a secretary's salary on top of her regular stipend for as long as I need her."

"I won't tell that to the commissioner, or he'll want it taken out of her wages," Gentry said. "I'll have her there at nine in the morning."

When the chief hung up, it occurred to Shayne that he hadn't eaten a thing since noon. And suddenly he was ravenously hungry.

There was nothing more he could do that night. He went out for dinner.

V

TUESDAY MORNING *Shayne* stopped at his bank on the way to the office and withdrew five thousand dollars from his account. He asked for a banded stack of one hundred fifty-dollar bills.

When he arrived at the office, Nell was already there.

"Morning, boss," she greeted him cheerily. "I've been sitting here twiddling my thumbs. Didn't your regular secretary leave any undone work I can catch up?"

"Lucy is always caught up," Shayne said shortly. Then, realizing his answer was unnecessarily grumpy, he said in a friendlier tone, "You can make me up a list of the serial numbers of these bills." He tossed the banded stack of fifties on her desk. "But first get those two new clients on the phone for me."

He went on into his private office and closed the door.

Nell got hold of Mrrs. Wilma Greene first. Shayne listened patiently to the society matron's suspicions about the self-styled duke who wanted to marry her daughter, and promised to look into the man's background. Then Nell got Acme Insurance on the phone. Acme suspected that a recent jewel-theft claim was fraudulent and that the insured had actually sold the gems. The detective agreed to investigate the case.

As he hung up after the second phone conversation, Nell came into the office and laid the stack of fifties and a neatly-typed list of serial numbers before him. When she went out again, he stared broodingly at the package of bills.

Even though he was sure the ransom demand was designed merely to lull his suspicion of the kidnapper's real motive, he couldn't understand why new fifty-dollar bills had been specified. Lew Grant was insane, but he wasn't stupid. And he must be short of funds. As long as he was demanding ransom, even though the demand was merely a cover-up, why hadn't he asked for bill denominations he could spend with safety? These would have to be fenced, which required underworld connections Shayne doubted that Grant had after six years of incarceration in a mental hospital.

His desk phone buzzed and Nell told him Chief Gentry was on the phone.

"Yes, Will?" the redhead inquired.

"Any further word from the kidnapper?" Gentry asked.

"No."

"I didn't suppose there would be," the chief said. "What I'm calling about is that the sample of Lew Grant's handwriting just came in. Yesterday I asked New

Orleans to send us one by airmail special and it just arrived. I haven't had our handwriting expert look at it yet, but it looks like the same writing to me."

Shayne was silent for a moment. Then he said, "That kills a brand new theory I was just beginning to toy with."

"What theory's that?"

"If it's the same writing, it doesn't matter."

"Well, I'm no handwriting expert," Gentry said. "It certainly looks like the same writing, but we won't know for sure until our expert compares both samples. And he's testifying in court over at Lauderdale today. I don't expect him back until around five. I'll call you as soon as he gives an opinion. Where will you be?"

"I don't know. Suppose I call you just after five."

"Okay, Mike," Gentry said, and hung up.

Shayne sat thinking for some time, preoccupiedly tugging at his left earlobe. The theory he had begun to form before Gentry's call killed it continued to nag at him. Now it seemed ridiculous to pursue it. But on the other hand there was nothing else he could do until ten o'clock that night when, presumably, he would hear from the kidnapper again. He could, of course, get to work on one of the cases he had just accepted, but he hardly felt like starting on a new case while Lucy was still in the hands of a kidnapper.

The devil with it, he thought. He'd check out his new theory just to occupy his mind.

Abruptly he swept the stack of bills and the list of serial numbers into a desk drawer and locked the drawer. Pushing back his chair, he rose with an air of decision. Striding into the outer office, he told Nell he might be gone for several hours, but would check in by phone periodically.

Five minutes later he was heading south on Highway One.

When he pulled into the filling station at Jungle Key, George Benedict greeted him with a wide grin.

"Hi, Mr. Shayne," the boy said. "What's up today?"

"Can I borrow your boat for a while, George?" the redhead asked.

"Sure, Mr. Shayne. Just drive down and take it. It's all gassed up. I'll phone Mom that you're using it, so she won't think you're stealing it if she sees you take off."

"Fine," Shayne said. "Thanks, George."

Less than twenty minutes later he beached the boat on Goat Key. Another boat of about the same size was already beached there and two men in overalls were working on the plane's broken wheel.

When Shayne walked over to

them, both looked up. The older, a lean, gray-haired man in his fifties, said, "Hi."

"Morning," Shayne said. "Who are you fellows?"

The second man, a dark, muscular man of about thirty, said, "Airplane mechanics from the airport. Who are you?"

"My name's Mike Shayne."

Both men obviously recognized the name, for both looked startled. The older man rose to his feet with a pleased smile and thrust out his hand. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Shayne. I've heard a lot about you. I'm Ned Jenkins."

"How are you, Ned?" Shayne said.

The younger man introduced himself as Harry Wills and apologized for not offering his hand because it was covered with black grease.

"Who sent you out here?" the redhead inquired.

"Fellow named Neisner," the gray-haired Jenkins said. "He owns the plane. He hired us to get it in flying shape and ferry it over to the airport. Can't figure out how he managed to break this wheel the way he did."

"He says he hit a hole in the sand," Shayne said.

"What hole?" Jenkins inquired, pointing to the tracks the plane had left.

"I wondered about that too," Shayne admitted. "But wind keeps ruffling the sand. It could have filled up. It was a moonlight landing and I suppose a hard bounce could have done it even if there wasn't any hole, couldn't it?"

"Maybe," Jenkins said dubiously. "But it looks more like he ran over a rock. Only there aren't any rocks on the beach. He must have hit hard and bounced twenty feet in the air in order to snap it like that. It's a miracle he didn't roll over."

Harry Wills said, "Let's get on with it, Ned."

Shayne said, "I came here to look for something. I could use some help. You men in a hurry to get that wheel repaired?"

The older man shrugged. "We've got all day."

"How'd you like to earn ten bucks apiece?"

The dark-faced Harry Wills started wiping his hands on a piece of waste. "You've got one recruit." He gave his partner an inquiring look.

"Two," the gray-haired mechanic said. "What are we looking for?"

"A man. I want the island covered from one side to the other. It isn't very big. Three of us ought to be able to cover it in an hour."

The two men gazed dubiously toward the jungle. The key was only about two hundred yards across, but its center was lush undergrowth which would have to be pushed through a yard at a time.

Jenkins asked, "Is this guy anybody dangerous?"

"Hardly." Shayne said dryly. He probably isn't even in there. But if he is, he's dead."

The two mechanics looked at each other. Then the younger man shrugged. "Let's get started," he suggested.

It only took them thirty minutes. The gray-haired mechanic found the body and yelled his discovery to the others. It lay covred by ferns only about twenty-five hards in from the beach.

When Shayne had worked his way to the spot, he found Jenkins gazing sickly down at a hand protruding from beneath the pile of ferns. Harry Wills arrived from the opposite direction at the same moment the detective did.

"I stepped on him," Jenkins said huskily. "I'd never have seen him under all this stuff if I hadn't."

Shayne carefully began lifting the concealing ferns away until the body was fully disclosed. It wasn't a very pretty sight, because it had obviously been there for some days. The body was that of a stocky, swarthy-faced man of about forty. He wore a dark business suit and the left side of the coat was caked with dried blood. The face was so badly disfigured that it made immediate identification difficult and Shayne was far from certain about it.

"Right through the heart," Harry Wills said in a low voice. "He probably never even knew what hit him."

Shayne took out his wallet and removed two tens. "We'll leave him here," he said. "I'll phone the state police from Jungle Key. You can show them where he is when they arrive."

VI

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE phoned the state police, he merely informed them that a body had been found on Goat Key by a man named Ned Jenkins. He didn't mention the dead man's identity, and the corporal he talked to seemed to assume he didn't know it.

"Jenkins and another man named Harry Wills are standing by on the island to show the police where it is," Shayne said.

"Who is this speaking?" the corporal asked.

"My name is Mike Shayne."

"The private detective? Yeah, I know who you are. Thanks for calling, Shayne. We'll get a boat right over there."

The corporal seemed to assume Shayne was merely calling for Jenkins and had no first-hand knowledge of the affair. The detective didn't enlighten him because he knew he would be held up for the rest of the day answering questions. He would have to answer them eventually anyway, of course, but he preferred to do it

at a different time back in Miami.

After checking by phone with Nell, who told him there had been no important calls, Shayne had lunch on Jungle Key, then headed back for Miami. He arrived at his office at one-thirty.

"The state police just phoned," Nell told him. "They want you to call the barracks right away. You're to ask for a Lieutenant Crosby."

"Uh-huh," Shayne asked. "If he phones back, you don't know where I am."

Nell raised her eyebrows. "Are you in some kind of trouble, Mike?"

"Nothing unusual," the redhead said.

"If the state cops are closing in on you, Mike—we'll take it on the lam together. I always wanted to be a gun moll."

Throwing her a grin, the redheal moved toward his private office. In the doorway he stopped and turned.

"Phone police headquarters, Nell, and find out where Art Neisner is staying. The desk sergeant ought to have the information."

He went on into his office and closed the door. A few moments later Nell opened it again.

"He's at the Hotel Abbot, Mike."

"Good. Ring the desk at the Abbot for me, will you?"

Nell disappeared. When Shayne's phone buzzed, he picked it up and she said, "The number is ringing, Mike."

A male voice said, "Hotel Abbot."

Shayne asked, "Is Arthur Neisner still registered there?"

"No, sir. Mr. Neisner checked out yesterday."

The minute Will Gentry released him from custody, Shayne thought. He said, "Did he leave a forwarding address?"

"Just a moment, please."

The desk man kept him waiting only about half a minute. Then his voice said, "Sorry, sir. No forwarding address."

"Thanks," Shayne said, and hung up.

He sat brooding for a few moments. Neisner was undoubtedly still in town. He wouldn't dare return to New Orleans without Chief Gentry's permission, for Gentry would have issued explicit instructions on that score. Obviously the man had moved simply to avoid being picked up for questioning again until he was ready to be picked up.

Shayne opened his desk phone book, found the airport number and dialed it. He asked for the mechanics' hanger and got hold of the foreman.

"Are Ned Jenkins and Harry Wills back yet?" he asked.

"Nope. They're over on some key putting a new wheel on a private plane some guy cracked up."

"I know that," Shayne said.

"Do you happen to know when the owner plans to pick that plane up?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, he said. Why?"

"Just wondered," Shayne said. "Thanks." He hung up.

If Neisner didn't plan to pick up his plane until tomorrow afternoon, there was no point in staking out the airport to wait for him to come after it. Shayne decided he would simply have to wait to see what happened at ten o'clock that night.

Nell opened the door and said, "Chief Gentry is here to see you, Mike."

Shayne frowned. At the moment he wasn't any more interested in talking to Gentry than he was to the state police. But there wasn't much he could do about it, because the chief's burly form loomed right behind Nell.

"Come on in, Will," he invited resignedly. "We may as well make it a full-dress conference."

The police chief lumbered into the room and sank into a chair. Nell discreetly pulled the door closed behind her. Gentry gave Shayne an aggrieved look.

"What's the matter?" the redhead asked.

"You know what's the matter," Gentry accused. A Lieutenant Crosby of the state police just phoned me. He thinks you're avoiding him and he wants us to pick you up for questioning. What's this about you discovering a body somewhere?"

"Lieutenant Crosby has two other people who were with me at the time to ask questions of, Will. He doesn't need me. I don't want to get tied up in another investigation until Lucy is safe. Stall the lieutenant off."

"Where'd you find this body? You're acting mighty strange about this whole thing, Mike."

"It's outside of your jurisdiction, Will, so don't worry about it."

"Who was it?"

"So far as I know, the state cops haven't identified him yet," Shayne said evenly.

Gentry examined him suspiciously. "I can see you don't want to tell me about it," he said. "Okay, if you guarantee that it *was* outside my jurisdiction. I'll put it down to your wanting to be free to deal with the kidnapper tonight. If you survive tonight, will you go see the lieutenant tomorrow?"

"Sure. And don't worry about my surviving."

"I won't," Gentry said grimly. "Regardless of what you want, I'm going to have your apartment staked out."

"You are in a pig's ear," Shayne snapped. "He'll back off and kill Lucy if he smells cop."

Chief Gentry stared at the redhead irritably. Shayne stared back at him steadily. For a long time

their gazes locked, then the chief made an impatient gesture.

"Okay, I'll go along with you, Mike," growled Gentry. "I won't stake your place out."

Shayne said in a weary voice, "Thanks, Will. I'm not trying to ruffle you. It's Lucy I'm thinking of."

A few moments later Gentry left. But at five P.M., just as Shayne was getting ready to leave the office, he phoned.

"Mike," he said in a peculiar voice. "Our handwriting expert is back and just looked over that ransom note."

"Uh-huh," Shayne said.

"Lew Grant didn't write it, Mike. Somebody went to a lot of trouble to imitate his writing."

"I figured that," Shayne said calmly. "He could do it easily, through long acquaintance with the man whose writing he forged. And he was just cocky enough to think he could get away with it. He probably figured handwriting would look more convincing than a typed letter."

"You figured it—and didn't tell me" Gentry said in an outraged tone. "What else do you know about this case that I don't, Mike?"

"Lots," Shayne said. "Tell you all about it tonight."

He hung up and walked out of his private office. The phone rang as he reached for his hat.

"If that's Will Gentry, I've already left," he told Nell. "I didn't say where I was going."

He went out quickly.

VII

AT TEN-THIRTY P.M. Shayne was sipping cognac and ice water in his apartment. The package of fifty-dollar bills was in his suit coat pocket and the coat lay over a front-room chair where he could grab it on instant notice.

The phone rang exactly at ten-thirty.

Lifting the receiver, the redhead growled, "Shayne speaking."

The same husky voice he had

heard once before said, "Just in case your line is tapped, go downstairs and wait by the booth in the lobby. It'll ring in exactly five minutes."

The phone went dead.

Sweeping up his coat, Shayne shrugged into it on the way to the door. Within two minutes he was entering the lobby phone booth.

It was ten-forty by his watch when the booth phone rang. Pushing the door shut, the redhead lifted the receiver and growled, "Hello."

"Shayne?" the husky voice inquired.

"Yeah."

"This is safer. I don't imagine there's a tap on this phone. I drove by your apartment hotel a few minutes ago and saw your car parked out front."

"So?"

"In a minute you're going to go out and climb into it. The car's under observation by a friend of mine, so you'd better be getting into it thirty seconds after I hang up. He's supposed to phone me the instant you take off, and if too much time passes before he calls, Brown Eyes is dead. If you take time to make a phone call, she's had it. Understand?"

"I understand," Shayne said in a tight voice.

"I've planned you a route where you'll be under observation at various points by other friends of mine. If any of them spot a tail on you, you can kiss Brown Eyes good-by too."

"There won't be any," the redhead said with impatience.

"Good. You're playing it smart. You got the five grand?"

"Yes."

"All right. Get in your car and drive straight ahead three blocks. Turn left two blocks, then left again for two blocks. Then turn right and keep going at about fifteen miles an hour. Repeat that."

In a savage voice Shayne said, "I'm to drive straight ahead for three blocks, turn left two, left again two, turn right and drive at fifteen miles an hour."

"You're a bright boy," the voice said. "You have thirty seconds to get to your car."

There was a click and the phone went dead.

Shayne slammed open the booth door and crossed the lobby with angry strides. Outside he slid under the wheel of his car without even glancing around. Starting the engine, he drove ahead three blocks, swung left, then made the other maneuvers he had been instructed to make.

There wasn't a car in sight behind him. If he was under observation, it must be from buildings, which would involve a considerable number of confederates. As this seemed unlikely, he guessed that the involved route set by the kidnapper was designed merely to make him think he was being

observed. Nevertheless he stuck religiously to instructions.

Two blocks after his second left he swung right and cut his speed to fifteen miles an hour. He had drifted a half dozen blocks at that speed when a gray sedan pulled away from the curb behind him and followed at a quarter-block distance.

The car trailed him for three more blocks before the driver seemed satisfied that no one had followed Shayne's car. Increasing speed, the trailing car drove alongside and called huskily, "Follow me, Shayne."

It was too dark for the redhead to get more than a bare glimpse of the driver's face and he couldn't make out the features.

When the gray sedan picked up speed, Shayne increased his to keep it in sight. The sedan angled south to the edge of town, finally turned onto Highway One.

A few miles south of town the gray sedan turned left onto a secondary gravel road which eventually led to what appeared to be a private beach. Fifty feet from the water's edge the sedan pulled up alongside a small beach cottage and its headlights winked out. The window shades of the cottage were all drawn, but lights shown behind the front ones.

Shayne parked behind the other car, cut his lights also and waited. Getting out, the sedan's driver walked back and poked the muzzle of an automatic through the window. He was a squat, bullet-headed man with a squashed nose and flat lips.

"Well, well," Shayne said. "Maxie Hakes. I haven't seen you since you used to strong-arm for Lew Grant and Art Neisner."

"I still do," Maxie said huskily. "Get out, Shayne."

The redhead climbed from the car.

"Lean your hands against the front fender," Maxie instructed. "I got to shake you down before we go inside."

Shayne obeyed the order. The gun dug into his back as the gunman patted his body in various places to see if he carried any sort of weapon.

"Okay," Maxie said. "I guess you're clean. Let's go." He gestured with his gun toward the cottage's front door.

Shayne went first, the man with the gun following a step behind. The door opened just as they reached it and the redhead walked right in. Maxie followed, shut the door behind him and leaned against it with his gun pointing at Shayne.

Shayne's immediate attention was centered on the brown-haired girl who sat in a corner chair with her hands tied behind her. He gave her a reassuring smile.

"Michael!" Lucy Hamilton said in a tremulous voice. "I knew you'd come."

"He's a real Galahad," a mocking voice said behind him.

Shayne turned to examine the man who had opened the door from inside. He wasn't overly surprised to see it was Art Neisner.

"Evening, Neisner," he said casually.

The blond man, who was standing with an expectant grin on his face, seemed disappointed that Shayne wasn't astonished to see him.

"Weren't you expecting Lew?" he inquired.

Ignoring the question, Shayne drew the sheaf of bills from his pocket and tossed it to Neisner. The man caught it, riffled the stack and thrust it into an inside pocket.

Shayne walked over and began to untie Lucy's hands.

"Are you under the impression that you're just going to walk out of here now?" Neisner asked.

Shayne finished untying the knots, smoothed out the four-foot length of rope and walked over to face Neisner with the rope trailing on the floor behind him.

"You've got your money, haven't you?" he asked.

Neisner made a disparaging gesture. "Five grand is a drop in the bucket to me, Shayne. I'll fence this off for ten percent. I'm planning to open business in Miami again, and I can't with you around."

"I see," Shayne said quietly. "You rigged this whole thing just to get to me, huh?"

"Of course."

"Why didn't you just have one of your goons burn me down on the street?"

Neisner looked pained. "Too crude, shamus. After our recent unpleasantness, the cops would look straight at me if anything fatal happened to you. But with an escaped maniac after your hide, they wouldn't give me a thought."

"Where is Lew?" Shayne inquired casually.

Neisner grinned. "As dead as you and your girl friend are going to be in a minute. He served his purpose."

"You rigged his escape, then killed him?"

Neisner shook his head. "I had nothing to do with his escape. He pulled that on his own. I just took advantage of it. Lew came running to me to get him out of the country. I told you a little white lie about Lew having a pilot's license too, Shayne. He thought I was flying him to Mexico. He didn't have any idea where we were until he saw Miami's lights below us. I told a little white lie about him having a gun on me too. Lew thought I was helping him escape for old times' sake. He was surprised as the devil when I pulled a gun as we flew over Miami and put two bullets into him."

"Just one," Shayne said. "The

other missed and put a hole in the door."

Neisner's eyebrows went up. "How do you know?"

"I saw it. I also found Lew Grant's body buried under ferns about twenty-five feet from the beach. You loused this operation up in a half-dozen different ways, Neisner. The mechanics you hired to repair your plane couldn't understand how you broke that wheel. But I did. You used a fire axe on it. Besides that the police know that the ransom notes were forged. A handwriting expert will be able to show that you forged them. When the cops really go to work on this, they'll turn up whoever you rented a boat from. You haven't got a chance."

The blonde man's face had gradually reddened. "What boat?"

"You had to rent a boat to get back to the island," Shayne said impatiently. "After you killed Lew and hid his body, you made Jungle Key on the life raft stole a car and drove it to Miami. You snatched Lucy, laid low over the weekend, then got back to Goat Key by boat. Probably you towed that old scow with you. You must have taken one if your stooges along—maybe Maxie here—so that he could drive the boat back to Miami. Then you beached the scow on Jungle Key, waded through the jungle and hired that kid to drive you into Miami. That completed your alibi."

Neisner emitted an uncertain laugh. "You just figured all this out now. The police don't know it."

"Try getting away with burning me and Lucy and see."

Neisner glanced at the bullet-headed Maxie Hakes, who was looking worried. Neisner frowned.

"I think he's bluffing," the blond man said. "Anyway, there's nothing to lose. If they hang Lew's kill on me, a couple of more won't matter. And these bodies are never going to be found."

His hand started to dip under his arm. Maxie, his worried gaze on his employer, let his gun dip just a trifle.

The rope trailing from Shayne's hand snaked out like a whip and wound around Maxie's wrist. A quick jerk pulled the man off balance and toward the redhead. Shayne's left fist crashed into his jaw with the force of a sledge.

The gun hit the floor an instant before Maxie's face did. Neisner's hand was appearing with a gun in it when Shayne took a long step toward him. Before the blond man could bring the gun to bear, Shayne's right fist whistled to his jaw.

Neisner landed flat on his back and stayed there.

Shayne turned to Lucy—grinned. "Oaky, Miss Secretary, the vacation's over. Get Will Gentry on the phone and tell him to pick up these two crumbs."

ASSAULT and Little Sister

by THEODORE STURGEON

TREMBLING IN THE bed, Little Sister cried aloud: "They *want* him to!" 'They', of course, meant the police . . . the newspapers . . . oh, everybody. 'To' meant the—the horror she must go through—again! That's the word, Little Sister: *Again!*—if he came back. *When* he came back. "Oh-h-h . . ." she moaned. But nobody answered. Nobody was there with her.

Nobody was there *yet.*

What was that?

She lay in the dark little room staring at the moon-dappled window, and held her breath. Surely something moved out in the hall? Something was *breathing* out there?

Call out, then. It—could be Peter Poteen, Detective Poteen guarding her after all. He—he could have thought it over, and—

But then, it could be *him.* It could be—the terribly feared one.

Or even, she thought—and her flesh crept cold, crept needly with speckles of cold—a new one. The papers were full of them and word got around, and some men found the victims especially attractive.

Pain banded her chest with the held breath, but still she held it, listening to nothing-at-all out there. But she knew that someone could be out there, holding his breath too, also listening. A roaring began in her ears and listening was useless. She breathed again, gasping open-throated to be silent. When she could, she sat up.

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A TERRIFYING STORY OF SUSPENSE

The author of this unusual and chilling mystery story shares with Ray Bradbury the distinction of being one of the two or three outstanding fantasy writers of our day. We think you'll agree that he has more than one brilliant string to his bow.

She could pant more quietly that way.

And now she could see out and down through the single panel of gauze which covered the lower half of her window. Dim in the moonlight, the not-quite adjoining roof shone in the summer night like an acre of ice. Last summer it had shone too, aching, baking around *him,* hotly holding his flesh, flat as it was, as if it would cup up around him.

She shuddered and rose, and padded on bare feet to the window. The roof outside, a warehouse, was not completely flat, nor altogether unobstructed. The edges rose slightly all around, not by bulwarks, but banked. And not far from Little Sister's window, to the right, jutted a small angular housing or kiosk, to shelter the stairs to the roof.

From inside her room it might seem that the roof was a larger, slightly lower extension of her own floor, but from the window itself she could look down—she seldom did—a dizzy sixty feet to the alley below. Due to the overhang of the warehouse roof, its edge was no more than four and a half feet from her building. Yet the sheer drop between had always been, for her, a magic barrier, an invisible wall between herself and the city and all that near part of the sky which combed itself through the city's stumpy teeth. There was such a lot of it out there, and none of it could see her. Behind her alley-chasm, and her panel of gauze, none of it could see her!

Seen by moonlight, it was as detailed as it had been last summer in the blaze of afternoon. But only to the eye of memory. In actuality, when something moved in the shadows of the kiosk, she couldn't be sure what it was, or even *if* it was. She knew every pebble and crease of the roofing, but pebbles and creases were only what should be there. What should *not* be there, movement or memory, was something she could not be sure of, and memory or movement, it filled her with terror.

Last summer she had stood here speechless, watching the flesh, the tanned flesh, the hard flesh pulsing with life, the unabashedly bare, the sweat-sheened. And there came the moment when her eyes and his had met . . . when in the locking of their gaze she was no longer invisible and he, no longer unseen.

The telephone was next, and the voice of Poteen. That was the first time she heard his voice, the non-committal, too-understanding Detective Peter Poteen, who said *yes-mam* like the polite cop on a television series, and perhaps was amused at himself for doing it, and very likely at her, too, for calling. He was immune to the infection of her outrage; he patiently had interrupted her, over and over again, until he had written down her

name and her address and had made sure he had them all spelled right—all that, before she could even tell her story.

And then it was yes mam, yes mam, yes mam, to all of it, and his silly question. Was the fellow still out there on the roof? Well of *course* not, she had blurted angrily. He was two hours gone. That was when Poteen's voice got a bit quieter, in that special way he had when he was interested, and also in that special way of his, the amusement showed a bit more. He asked her if she meant she had waited two whole hours to report the man to the police?

She supposed she had, though to this day she could not remember what she had done with the two hours. "I was upset, that's all!" she had shouted into the phone; and "Sure," he had said, "Sure," and he had promised to check on it. Check on it! With the papers full of it, every day, two, three times a day sometimes, the headlines, what happened in parks, alleys, stairways, even in the rooms of women alone. The whole city was aroused, and all the people in it except the police, except Detective Poteen.

Hanging up, she had glared at the bland crooked telephone and *"Oh!"* she had shrieked at it, unable to find a word for what she felt.

A woman alone could be preyed upon, brutalized, murdered. Or worse. *Then* the police would swing into action. Then they would be around with their radios and their fingerprint kits and blood-stain tests and microscopes and things—they were very good at that. Afterwards. After she had been—

Oh! The word was too horrible to say, even to herself.

Check on it. They'd check on it all right. Maybe pass Poteen's cold careful notes around at the precinct station and laugh at her.

It had come night then, that hot summer last year, and she had sat tensely in her wicker chair, glancing in fury at the bland cornerless hulk of the telephone, and then at the textured face of the gauze that shut out the night beyond.

And once—she could still remember it—she had found herself wishing, actually, fervently wishing, that her door would burst open, that one of the fiends, the beasts of prey, would stand there drooling and baring his teeth, and would leap on her . . . leaving only enough afterwards to enable her to say through broken lips, *I told you it would happen, Detective Poteen. I told you.* And standing over her bleeding body, Poteen would take off his hat and say *Yes Mam!*

And it had happened, had happened! even as she sat there thinking that, the soft footsteps in the hall, the knock on her door. She had gone rigid, and suddenly the

insides of her mouth and throat were dry blotting-paper, while a great cold knot writhed itself into shape in her stomach and drew tight. It wasn't until the knock came again that she was able to answer at all.

"Who is it?"

"You don't know me. The guy on the roof."

She did not answer. She couldn't. In her mind's eye, vividly, she saw through the thin wall. She saw him just as she had seen him by the kiosk in the hot afternoon, standing so shamelessly; she could only imagine him the same way by her door, and again—still—with his gaze locked with hers.

She got up, that hot night a year ago, and she had never before heard, had never known, the crackles, shrieks and shouts a wicker chair gives out when a body leaves it. She had crept to the telephone, dialled. Oh! what a noise. What a grinding and clacking a telephone dial makes. Whether or not she could hear him breathing out there, she thought she did, and it was horrible.

He knocked again, louder; it was thunder, it was guns. *Fortieth Precinct; Sergeant Peora,* yelled the phone in her ear.

With her mouth to the telephone's mouth, close like kissing, wet, she said, "I told you this would happen, I told that Mister Poteen, the man, he's breaking in, he—" *This is the police, Sergeant Deora,* rasped the telephone scratchily, tinnily, too loud. *I can't hear you. Who's calling, please?* "Oh, sh! *Shh!!*" Little Sister whispered explosively. "Not so loud, he'll hear you. I called this afternoon—" *May I have your name?*

Angrily, she told him. The knock came again. Out in the hall, a voice, "I got to see you a minute. Come on, I got to talk to you." Little Sister hugged the phone, turned her back to the door. Her eyes were wide and turned so far over to the side that they hurt. "I called this afternoon and told that detective, that Mister Poteen—" *Your address, please.* "Oh!" she cried, but still cried whispering, "Oh! Oh! A man's trying to break in right now, I *told* you he would!" *Yes mam. Now if you will please give me your address.*

Like cursing, she gave her address. "This afternoon—" *We'll check on it.* "But, but, this afternoon I—" she said into the phone, the dead phone, he had gone and left her alone, now of all times.

A knock again, only one, but hard; not a knock, a blow. "Come on, I ain't going to hurt you. I got to talk to you a little."

Holding the phone still, she panted, and panted, and suddenly filled her lungs and screamed *No!*

"Cut it out!" said the voice quietly, urgently, close to the crack of the door. "Cut it out, will

you? Somebody'll hear. Just open up, let me in a minute, will ya?"

Then she had screamed, and screamed again, and screamed and screamed. Walled in by her own screams, she saw rather than heard the door being pounded on; it trembled; then the knob turned and it shook; then it opened, oh God, it opened. He was there, with his shoulders hunched, his mouth twisted. He hurled himself . . . something struck her across the shoulder-blades; her canned-goods shelf— Then she must have risen, turned, backed away.

"Shut up, wait, be quiet, don't yell like that, don't—" He seemed almost to be pleading. She ducked under the shelf and slid sidewise and turned to flee to—oh, her bed. The sight of her own bed filled her with a new and terrible fear, and she screamed a new scream, a new kind of scream from a new kind of fear.

He touched her.

After that things were misty, swirling. The room was full of people. Somebody turned on the big overhead light and it hurt her eyes. The man from the roof looked some smaller, and a whole lot younger, with three policemen holding him. Younger, well, of course, *these* days.

Then the parade down the stairs and out on the street, the heads popping out of doors, the crowd around the three radio cars with their scything red lights, and a drumming white ambulance, all helter-skelter in the narrow street, and traffic stopped and car doors open with the people out and crowding around, crowding around. All the eyes, the eyes, gloating over her, over *him.*

Coming down the brownstone steps, a woman spat right in his face. In the car, sobbing, and a big policeman saying she was all right now, all right now.

Then questions in a bare bright room, with people coming in and out—and more questions. Once it was *him,* with only two policemen holding him this time; she did not, could not, look at his face, but she knew him all right, and said so; he tried to speak but they told him to shut his mouth. Someone brought her a paper cup of lukewarm tea.

Then the courtroom, and flashbulbs and the smell of dust and old sweat—nothing clean but the flag. *Stand up!* somebody shouted and the judge came in and almost everybody sat down again. It was difficult to follow the proceedings and she did not try. She did not have to.

Her turn came and she was led to the right place to stand and touch the Book, and then to the right place to sit; seated, she was still led; she was asked questions which could only be answered *Yes,* and *Yes,* and *No,* and *Yes;* they thanked her.

He took the stand. She averted

her eyes. It was soon over. Home then in a police car, through an avenue of flash-bulbs, on the arm of a policewoman. All a blur, all nothing, really; the real thing was the next thing, the day, the next day.

First there were the papers, the two tabloids with her picture weeping on the front page, and *Story on Page 3* and *More pictures in Centerfold.* The headline on one was NAB ATTACKER IN ASSAULT ACT and the other one said RAPIST NABBED SENT UP 5½ HRS.

The first one had the story she liked best. It had the reporter's name on it and began "A living nightmare burst upon a lonely lady late last night when . . ." The other one, though it was about her, wasn't so much about *her.* It was mostly about the judge. Her judge and another judge had been having a sort of race.

So many of these terrible attack things coming up had made them revive the old Night Court, and it seems that her Judge had heard and sentenced an attacker in less than twelve hours, so this other judge beat him to it by almost three hours, so this time her judge had packed the convict off to wherever it was he went, just five and a half hours after *he* had knocked on her door. And serve him right, too, said the paper, and all others like him. They had to learn that justice in Our Town was swift and certain.

She wasn't on the front page of the other papers, but she was in them all somewhere. And all that day at the market, people came to see her, to talk to her. People she had worked with for years spoke to her—really spoke to her—for the first time. And some of the men just couldn't get enough of her. Well, they *cared.*

That was the day everyone began to call her Little Sister. And when she walked back from the bus stop in the afternoon, they called out to her—"You okay, Little Sister?" Well, if it took such a terrible thing to show that way down deep people *cared* . . . Still, it was a terrible thing, terrible. Everyone said so.

And in about three weeks, that same Detective Poteen came to see her. He had called first, made it convenient, had been very polite and understanding. He was a man who listened a great deal more than he talked. He had that skin that always looks tanned, and glossy black hair and a young face with old pouches under the eyes.

He asked her about the whole thing all over again, right from the beginning. She told it to him, just the way it had been written in the papers. Maybe, she had thought, a police detective is too busy to read the papers. She had asked him why the police were still interested, and he said they weren't,

but he was. He was off duty at the time. She thought, at the time, that it was kind of nice.

Then the year went by, and while it was warm, and when it was warm again, she used to sit sometimes in her wicker chair by the window, invisible behind the square of gauze, and gaze out across her unseen barrier—sixty feet, straight down—to the roof. And in her memory's gaze she would see him again, the whole thing . . . unseen by him, remote and safe. "You all right, Little Sister?" the people said as she passed. "Watch yourself, now —be careful . . ."

The year went by, and this afternoon Poteen called again. She'd been a little slow in responding to him . . . that was funny . . . it wasn't because she didn't recognize his voice. She did. It was just that for some reason she couldn't believe it. And then with his soft polite voice he had drawn the curtain of terror over her: "I thought I ought to tell you— —Clewie Richardson got out yesterday."

"Who's Louie Richardson?"

"Clewie. Clewton W. Richardson. The boy who was sent up on your complaint last year."

She had, of course, seen the name; it just hadn't stayed with her. "I forgot his name. I . . . wanted to forget everything," she said pathetically. Then the full impact of the news struck her. "Got *out?* You mean he's *back?*"

"He lives here," said Poteen's voice gently. Then, very soothing, he said, "Now don't you get excited or worried or anything. There's no danger for you. I just felt I ought to tell you, in case you should see him on the street or something. It's all over, so just don't worry."

"Oh," she said, worried, terribly worried. "Oh dear." While she was saying it he said goodbye quietly and hung up.

That was about three this afternoon; now it was nearly ten, and dark; but for a hazy sliver of moon, peeping and hiding, it was dark, too dark. Yet she would not turn on her light. As night was born, so her worry turned to fright; as the night grew around her and all the world, so her fright turned to terror, until at last it was a haze about her like the one in the sky.

And like the fragile stick of moon out there, all she could do was peep and hide in it, peep and hide, and the blur of her fear filtered common sounds into breathings by her door, and ordinary shifts of moonlight into movement on the roof.

Call the police, she kept telling herself, and *No, what would I say? I thought I saw, I thought I heard . . . ?* Then, *Go!* she would tell herself, and answer, *go where?* . . . and then, since no passion, even the ecstasies of fear, can continue indefinitely, but must

ebb and peak, the haze of terror would fitfully clarify and she could get her breath and bearings. Detective Poteen had told her there was nothing to fear. And *he*—Louie or Clewie?—surely he'd have learned his lesson, he wouldn't try to . . .

But then, he would. She knew he would. She knew it so well that she was waiting for him. This is what she kept coming back to as the night grew tight around her, strong and dark, and each time she came back to it, the terror peaked higher. And off again on the climbing spiral: *Call the police.* (No, what would I—) Then, *Go! Go where?* . . . oh! someone's breathing out there! Something's moving out there . . . Oh!

Something was indeed—someone in the moonlight. Little Sister peered and peered through the gauze, then, because she could not bear to be uncertain, no, not for another second, she took the flimsy panel and held it to one side.

And he, *he* stood there! and when he saw the curtain move, he smiled. She could see the gleam of his teeth in the moonlight.

He began again to take off clothes. He took off a jacket and tossed it behind the kiosk. He took off a shirt. He took off his shoes, balancing like a great bird on one foot, then the other, never taking his eyes off her window. And all the while, smiling.

Whether or not he had learned any lesson, she had, and that was, don't scream. It was only now, this second, that she knew she had learned it, knew what her screams had done last time. She whimpered only, dropped the curtain and fled to the telephone. She lifted it, and, unable to stay away from the window, carried it as close as she could. She took up the receiver—and oh! that blessed hum!—and looking out and back, dialled. And while she was dialling, she saw the dim form outside spring lithely up the side of the kiosk, stand and balance on tiptoe against the flickering sky.

He reached up high over his head, took the faint pencil-line of a wire in his hands, and leapt lightly back to the roof. She heard the twang as the wire parted, and in her hands, like a captured bird, the telephone went dead.

Her breath stopped as the life left the instrument. She thought her heart stopped too. She stood absolutely notionless, gazing at the dead thing, and then she moaned softly, softly replaced the handset, and backed away from the window. And even all the way back, near the bed, she could see him, for he had retired to the middle of the wide roof opposite.

And now he took two springy strides toward her, and now he skipped once like a diver or an acrobat getting his stride, and now he was sprinting, and up the slop-

ing, ramp-like eave he came, and launched himself into the air!

The square black hole of her open upper sash must have seemed a small target indeed—almost too narrow to admit his shoulders. But through it they went, never touching. His whole long body arrowed through the little opening and came at her like a javelin. And as she tensed herself for the crash of his landing, his body curved downward toward the floor. As his hands touched it he snapped his chin down to his collarbones, curled up in a tight ball, turned all his velocity into a roll. And there was no crash at all, only a great soft complex thud which shook her body and the bed, ending with a bump as he came up standing on his stockinged feet.

For a long moment—forever—they stood silently so, again their gazes locked, he smiling and balanced on his wide-planted feet, she pressed back against the edge of the bed. Then she sighed and fell backwards. She screwed up her eyes and her mouth, and through her twisted lips she gasped, "All right! All right!"

"LITTLE SISTER. Little Sister!"

Calling, calling . . . "I told you," she blubbered, "I told you all right."

"All right," the voice echoed her, "You're all right now. You must have fainted."

She let her aching eyes open a crack, and cried out; the big overhead light was on, and it hurt her.

An arm slid cleverly behind her, raised her up. She parted her lips to speak, and cold touched them, a cup, cold water . . . she drank a little and began to tremble. "You're all right now," said the voice over the phone—oh God, not over the phone, right here in the room. She opened her eyes again, now ready for the blaze of light, and looked into the bland quiet face of Detective Sergeant Peter Poteen.

Numbly, she let her gaze fall away, and there across the room, hunched into her wicker chair and much too big for it, was *he, him,* the man on the roof. Louie, Clewie!

Oh!

"I knew he'd try to see you," said Poteen, deftly fixing her pillow behind her. "I was out in the hall. I thought it might save everybody some trouble if I was with him at the time. I lost him earlier and figured to meet him on the way to the door. Never dreamed he'd fly in like a bird."

Unbelievably, the man, this Louie or Clewie or whatever, he grinned briefly, grinned at Poteen, and it was not at all as if he was a prisoner, or even a criminal. Little Sister began to cry.

Poteen left her alone to cry. He stepped away from her and he and the man talked—chatted was the word—friendly as could be—their

faces politely averted while she pulled herself together.

When she was able, she whimpered, "What is it? What happened? what are you doing here?"

Poteen returned to her immediately. He looked at her gravely and then pulled up the straight chair. From the shelf above, he got some tissues from her box. He sat down and gave them to her. She crumpled one and sniffled into it. He said, "Tell me what happened that other time. Last year."

"You know what happened."

"Tell me *all* of what happened."

"That," she remembered, "is what you asked me when you came here that time, three weeks after."

He nodded. "And you told me what you told the papers. I just wanted to know the rest of it."

"There isn't any rest of it."

He breathed deeply once, a patient sound, not exactly a sigh. "That first time you called me, to complain of a Peeping Tom making obscene gestures at you from the roof. Was that the first time you had seen this fellow out on the roof?"

She opened her mouth, drew in air—and then hesitated. There was a certain something about Poteen's bland dark face that was not easy to lie to. "Well," she said at length, "no, it wasn't."

Poteen made no move anyone might describe, but something inside him seemed to relax. "How many times did you see him before?"

"*I* don't know," she said in the beginnings of anger. "How do you expect me to remember exactly how many times?"

"Ten times? Twenty times? Fifty?"

"Oh, not fifty."

"More than ten?"

"What right have you got to question me like this?" she shouted.

The thing inside him seemed to tighten up again. He reached in his breast pocket and drew out a thick sheaf of mimeo paper. "Know what this is? This is the transcript of his trial. Listen:" he said in a tone which gave her no choice but to do as she was told.

He read, " 'Q. Did you or did you not indecently expose your person to the view of the plaintiff?

" A. I didn't even—

" 'Q. Answer the question. Did you or did not not—

" 'A. But I was only—

" 'The Court: The witness will answer the question.

" 'Q. Did you—

" 'A. Yes! Yes! Yes! If that's what I got to say.' "

Poteen held up the transcript so she could see a handwritten line pencilled in it. "Here was something off the record but the court stenographer remembered it. His Honor stood up and leaned across the bench and yelled at the witness, 'You did, did you! You got a

fat nerve pleading innocent, wasting everybody's time!' Then he said to strike that."

Poteen paused, then struck the papers softly with his free hand. "Let's just say that *this* is my right to question you this way." He folded the transcript and put it away, and went on in exactly the previous voice, "You'd seen him out on the roof before?"

She whispered, "Yes."

"More than ten times?"

". . . Yes."

"More than twenty?"

She glared at him. "No."

"Very well," he shrugged in a way that took all the strength out of her glare; it just didn't matter. "Now, as to what was called in court 'indecent exposure' and 'obscene gestures.' Exactly what was that? Just what did he do? Try to remember."

Little Sister really and truly blushed. "I . . . c-can't say it!"

"All right. Perhaps I can find a way to say it for you. He was relieving himself. Is that about it?"

She put her hands to her cheeks and nodded.

"Very well," he said clinically, not surprised, angry, shocked, anything. "Now—was this the only occasion when you had seen this?"

She would not answer.

"Well?" And the way he produced that one syllable, she had to answer. She shook her head.

"How many times?" He waited, then said, "More than twice? Ten times?"

"Five times," she said at last.

"Five times," he repeated. "All right, let's get back to what he was doing on the roof in the first place."

She made a vague gesture. "Well . . . tricks."

He waited, and she said, "You know—like, *tricks*. Standing on his hands and all. He had some sort of —well, pipes, like."

"Handstand bars. Like a small parallel bars. Built 'em himself," said Poteen. "One more thing—how was he dressed when he did this?"

"Well, not in much, I can tell you!"

"Would you say it was less, say, than a bathing suit?"

"It *was* a bathing suit."

That inward, indescribable relaxation came to Poteen again, and he said, "Well, we don't need any more of this third degree. Now let me fill in the details for you.

"Clewie Richardson there is what they used to call a circus buff. Ever hear that term? Circus struck when he was barely able to walk. All he ever wanted in his life was to be a flyer—you know —aerialist. Came to town to get a job and save up enough to get down to Florida; Sarasota, where the circus had winter quarters. Figured he could save up enough to keep him until he could get some sort of a job with them. Got

a night loading job in the warehouse, worked hard.

"They let him have a checker's office to sleep in—just a rathole, but they got a kind of watchman out of the deal, and he got to save a few more dollars. Meantime he kept practicing, keeping himself in shape. Last summer he was ready to make the break, go south, try for his break with the circus. Last summer he was seventeen. Three solid years working on his own for that."

"I didn't know!" Little Sister said in defense—in annoyance.

"You didn't want to know," said Poteen mildly. "So he lived in the warehouse, working nights, practicing days. The only washroom is down on the ground floor, by the way, which is why he—" He shrugged. "Technically he was guilty of *something*. That could constitute a nuisance, I suppose. Now then: as to this exposure charge. In all the time he used the roof, he *never* knew he could be seen. Out in the middle, where he had his bars, maybe—there are tall buildings out there, though none nearby.

"But back in this corner, by your window, that stairway-housing thing, that blocks off the view from everywhere except this window. When he stepped behind it, he did it to get out of sight. Yours is the only living quarters on this floor, right? All the rest is loft space. Right?"

Mute, she nodded.

"All right, now I'm going to describe to you exactly what happened that day." He glanced at the boy, and against her will, her gaze was drawn to him too. Clewie Richardson was a big youth, wide, tall, well-muscled, and somehow scrubbed-looking. He sat in her wicker chair dressed in black slacks and a white T-shirt, his stockinged feet crossed at the ankles, his whole large lithe frame leaning raptly toward Poteen.

"He worked out for a couple of hours—oh, it had to be the hours you'd be home, what a break! You and that early-morning job of yours! And then he—well, he committed his nuisance. And it was then for the very first time he saw you looking through your curtain. You can imagine how he felt. Or maybe you can't.

"All right—he cleared out then, and you waited two whole hours—why, I'll never know—and then took it upon yourself to make that phone call. So I said I'd check on it and I did. I talked to the men loading at the warehouse; Clewie was out eating. When he got back and they told him the cops were looking for him, he got all wound up. All he wanted to do was to talk to you, tell you he didn't know you were watching, didn't mean anything by it. He came up and knocked on your door, and next thing you know you started to scream. He wanted to calm you

down, explain, but it all blew up in his face.

"Then once the squad-cars got here—" Again, that meaningful shrug. "The way the papers were playing up assault cases this last year, he didn't have a chance. Even the defense attorney told him to save himself trouble and plead guilty. He didn't, and—" Audibly, he tapped the transcript in his breast pocket—"look what that got him."

"I . . . didn't know," said Little Sister, rather differently.

"I didn't either, until next day. I went off duty after I spoke to the guys at the warehouse; then by next morning it was all over and Clewie was upstate. Five and a half hours, my God! Not that I'd've been able to do anything. Or wanted to, at the time. I had the fever, same as everyone else. But later . . . well, it kept bothering me.

"Finally I came to see you and somehow, the way you told the story, it—oh, it was too much the way a sob-sister writes a crime story. So I looked it up. You had that scandal-sheet Page Three story about by heart, didn't you?"

"You—" and for a moment she thought she was going to swear at him, but she changed it. "You could have stayed out of it."

He shook his head and said mildly, "No I couldn't." He looked at her with those understanding dark eyes for too long. She had to turn away, and he said, just like on TV, "I'm a cop, mam. I have to uphold the law. But sometimes I stop and think what the law is. The law in this country is the best we can do to make justice apply to everybody. That's what they get made for and that's how most of 'em work. If they don't work that way then somebody ought to fix the trouble.

"Look here," he said, waving a hand at Clewie Richardson and meaning the whole thing, the complaint, assault, arrest, imprisonment—all of it. "The law was upheld all down the line, but it took a year out of his life for a misdemeanor. Everything costs, Little Sister. Somebody pays for everything. Clewie Richardson here paid plenty—for what?

"Partly for newspapers reaching down long handles to stir up some circulation. Partly for rapists who never got caught. Partly for his own ignorance, not knowing his rights, and his own bullheadedness, trying to talk to you. And partly, he paid for something you got out of it. That last is the only part I really don't know about. What did you get out of it, Little Sister?"

"I don't know what you mean, and I don't know why you're . . . *bullying* me like this!"

"I believe you," said Poteen, and there was real wonderment in his voice. "All right, Clewie—you win. You can tell her. Little Sister,

this boy lay every night in the reformatory thinking and dreaming of just one thing—to tell you something you ought to know. I didn't think he should because I don't like people to get hurt and because I knew it would get him into more trouble. That's all I wanted to stop him for. But now —go ahead, Clewie."

The boy got up and came across the room on silent feet. He was huge. He was smiling, or perhaps just baring his teeth. She shrank back on the bed. He said softly, "It's the same thing I wanted to tell you that first night, when you screamed so much. You saw me out there that day, and I saw you, just your face, peekin' through that curtain.

"I thought you was a *little funny-lookin' old man.* That's why I took my time, finished what I was doin'. And that's why I had to see you so bad when the cops came around and told the guys they were lookin' for me on a complaint by some *woman.* I had to find you and tell you I never realized it was a woman watchin' me!"

"That was the first time," said Poteen. "Now tell her what you spent every night for a year dreaming about telling her. Go ahead. I think you should."

The boy laughed. "It's the same thing, really. When I saw you through that curtain, I thought you were a funny-lookin' little old man. Well after that I seen you close up, without no curtain, and all I want is to tell you —you still look like a funny little old man!"

Little Sister's face turned grey.

Poteen rose and motioned the boy toward the door. "The circus is in town," he said, "I got him a job with it. That takes care of some of the justice. I think he just took care of the rest."

He let the boy precede him through the door and, with his hand on the knob, turned to face her. "You knew he thought that, didn't you? Is that why? Is that the reason you waited two hours to make your complaint? Is that why you wouldn't let him talk to you? To grab this one chance to tell the world you were a woman, when the world never really knew it before? Is that why you told the reporters 'everybody calls me Little Sister' when nobody ever called you that before?"

"Yes they did!" she shrieked. "Yes they did! My Daddy used to call me that!"

Politely, understandingly, Detective Sergeant Peter Poteen closed the door.

**There were thirteen paper slips . . .
And each was a sentence of death.**

The Thirteenth Accident

by

JAMES

FRANCIS

DWYER

I MET CUMNER one evening at a little, ingeniously tucked-away cafe on Macdougal Street. An odd assortment of people patronize that cafe. The coffee they serve is first-rate, and the regulars came for the coffee alone. The other dishes are for irregular customers from uptown who occasionally find their way into the place.

And I knew Cumner for three months before he told me his terrifying story. A dozen or more times we had talked about the Gabriel Klinst mystery. But on this particular occasion he startled me by leaning across the table, and making a statement that stunned me so that I sat staring at him incredulously.

"I knew Gabriel Klinst," he said softly. "I knew him well."

I stared at him incredulously. The F.B.I. and the police of twenty states had searched for Klinst during the weeks following the almost unbelievable sequence of events which the newspapers had called "The Twelve Accidents."

But so far the search had ended in a blind alley. Rewards had failed to flush Klinst from wherever he had taken refuge, although, as far as anyone could determine, he had committed no crime. It wasn't difficult to understand why the case had stirred up such a hornet's nest.

Why should twelve persons in different walks of life have met with accidental death in New York City during the same month, and under almost identical circumstances? Each had been found with a slip of paper containing a single sentence and the name of Gabriel Klinst in their pockets when the police had arrived on the scene.

No papers had been left by the victims either in their homes or on their persons to show their connection with the man otherwise, and yet that strange sentence—*I am at peace*—above Klinst's signature was found tucked securely in the clothing of each, linking the crimes unmistakably.

"Surely you're not serious," I said. "There's still a reward of five thousand dollars for anyone who can identify Klinst, and enable the police to take him into custody, if only for questioning."

"I'm not interested in the reward," Cumner said.

"All right. Forget that part of it. Just tell me how you came to meet him."

"I was his friend," he said, quietly. "I don't know why I should be telling you this. But—" He shrugged. "Sometimes I like to unburden myself a little, just as Klinst did. He came here about once a week, generally on Saturday nights, and we became quite friendly. He was a tall, thin man, with a clean-shaven face. I would have said, off-hand, that he was about forty-five, but he might have been younger.

"None of the imaginary portraits which the papers published resembled him in the least. And none of the people who came forward, claiming they knew a man of the same name, were of the slightest help to the police."

Cumner paused, sipped his coffee with a thoughtful air, and regarded me steadily for a moment. "Klinst gave me those slips of paper, and it was I who deliver them to each of the dead men."

I was too startled to say anything. I could only stare at him.

"I've tried hard at times to make myself believe it was all a wild, fantastic nightmare," he went on quickly. "Something I'd imagined. But I still have the proof with me."

Cumner spread his elbows, and

used his thin hands as a support for his weak chin. "Klinst and I became quite friendly, as I've said. He would sit at this table, and drink coffee with me on the nights when he came here, and occasionally he would walk me home. He had an extraordinary mind. He would talk about his European travels—about books and politics and current events in general, and I would listen.

"I listened to long and too seriously, Dalton. I listened to that man until I came to believe that no one knew as much as he did about life—about so many different aspects of living.

"It was on November the twenty-ninth that he gave me the slips of paper. They were all identical. Thirteen small paper squares with the single sentence, *'I Am at peace'* printed above his signature.

"He told me what to do with them, I think. But I can't recall what he said to me. It went completely out of my mind. That's very strange, isn't it? His words went out of my head, and they've never returned.

"I didn't go out at all that day. I stayed at home and tried to remember what Klinst had told me to do with the messages. I knew that trying to find him would be a hopeless task. He hadn't given me his address, and he only came to the cafe about once a week, as I've told you.

"On December first, early in the

morning, I took a subway to Brooklyn Bridge. I had the slips of paper in my pocket, and I was still wondering about the forgotten instructions when I started across Park Row towards the Post Office. I was just crossing the street when I met Chester Brett. Of course, I didn't know his name then. But I recognized him when I saw his picture in the papers that evening.

"He passed me before the urge to give him one of those paper slips really took hold of me. I walked a few yards past him, and then—I rushed back and thrust the slip into his hand. You know the rest. He was killed in the subway accident a few hours later, and that same mysterious scrap of paper was found in his pocket."

"Did he say anything when you gave it to him?" I asked. "Did he speak to you at all?"

"No," said Cumner, "He looked at me and then at the scrap of paper, and passed on."

Cumner took another sip of coffee, and his lips tightened.

"It was on December the third, early in the afternoon, that I saw Mary Lane. She was just getting into a parked car in front of the Waldorf-Asoria. I was struck by the great beauty of her face—you will perhaps recall that she was an attractive girl. I walked straight up to the car and gave her the second slip. She smiled at me as if she regarded me as a harmless lunatic, and I walked on without speaking. As you know, she was killed in Park Avenue at dusk when her car collided with a taxi, and the scrap of paper I'd given her was found in her handbag.

"Why they didn't throw the slips away has never ceased to puzzle me. Wait though—hold on. One did throw his slip away! I forgot him for the moment. He was the fourth—the drunk who fell into the North River. I met him about eleven o'clock at night on December fourth. I was crossing Abingdon Square, and he asked me for a quarter. I was immediately gripped by the same compulsive urge that had taken possession of me on three previous occasions.

"I tried to fight it off, but I couldn't. I gave him one of the slips. He flung it down and cursed me as I turned away quickly and walked on. At the corner I looked back. He had returned to the spot where he had thrown the slip, and was trying to decipher the printed sentence under a street light. The piece of paper was found on him when they hauled him from the water.

"The next morning I gave a slip to Farrelly, a truck driver, and he accepted it without saying a word. On the same night I gave another to young Pillipson. It was strange that he hadn't read about the other men and women in the papers. That is what puzzles me. Although every paper in New York featured the story conspicuously the day after the alcoholic was found in the North River, not a single one of the eight people I encountered in the six following days seemed to have heard of the tragedy. They simply stared at me quitely, and accepted the slips without saying a word."

"But how did you meet a person like Mrs. Hellings?" I asked. "She never went out."

"She was sitting on the steps in front of her brownstone," said Cumner. "I was just passing by, and climbed the steps on impulse. She must have kept the slip in her hand while that fool son of hers was fiddling with the powder that exploded and killed her.

"I'm glad I've confided in you, Dalton. "I've wanted to tell someone, and now at last I have. He *was* the real Gabriel Klinst, wasn't he? No doubt about that. I haven't

set eyes on him since the morning he gave me the slips. He must have gone away, left the city. He was the brainiest man I ever met, but he was also a murderer. How can I shut my eyes to it? In some incomprehensible way he must—"

I interrupted him, a little impatiently, I'm afraid. "You say that Klinst gave you thirteen slips. How do you explain the fact that there were only twelve cases reported. Only twelve persons had the slips on them when they were found."

"I only handed out twelve slips," said Cumner. "I have never had the desire to give the last one away." He placed his thin fingers in his vest pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. He held it across the table for my inspection.

A wave of fear swept over me, and I recoiled in alarm. "I don't want it!" I cried. "Put it away!"

Cumner laughed and lifted his hand to return the slip to his pocket. But the movement was never completed.

A heavy piece of plaster cornice immediately above his head came away suddenly, and struck him with tremendous force. He cried out and lurched forward, upon the table, his shoulders heaving for the barest instant. After that he remained perfectly still.

The policeman who was called in took the slip of paper from Cumner's fingers and shook his head. We were both badly shaken when the medical examiner arrived, and took charge of the body.

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•

SNOW WAS BEGINNING to fall. Night had settled in. The longshore gangs had gone and the pier was deserted now. Three men sat in a car across the street.

"Where's Sal?" one said. "What's keeping him?"

"Don't blow your top, Joe. He's got to clear the track."

"He's taking his time. It don't look good with us hanging around like this," Joe answered.

"Maybe you want to walk home," Dom said from the back of the car.

"Yeah, why don't you take a walk?" Rocco said, grinning. He was the one behind the wheel and he didn't like Joe. He'd never trusted him.

Joe didn't reply. All three sat in silence again, watching the pier through the falling snow. The huge entrance was open. A watchman stood there, but he was "safe," part

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of the setup, a boozer with a red-face and watery eyes who conveniently turned his back for the gift of a bottle.

A tug hooted in the bay. As the sound died, a man came out of the pier and hurried toward the car. Rocco opened the door for him. He climbed in and lit a cigarette.

"You get the stuff?" Rocco asked.

"No."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. It's all arranged. See the purser and pick up the package."

"Why me?" asked Rocco.

"Somebody's got to do it. I'm picking you."

Rocco hesitated. This was the worst part of the deal, but someone had to do it. The boss had picked him.

The quicker the better, he thought, and stepped from the car. The cold took his breath away. He dropped his cigarette and walked toward the pier. The guard nodded to him at the entrance.

It was colder inside the pier. The ship lay ahead, on the south side. She'd docked two days before, after lying at anchor in the harbor for a week because of a strike.

A long wait for the stuff, but it was worth it. Rocco quickened his steps and reached the gangplank. Snow was beginning to whiten it.

He climbed to the deck. All was silent here. He entered the deckhouse. The ship felt empty. He took the nearest stairway to the purser's cabin and knocked on the door.

It opened immediately. A tall dark man with glasses nodded and handed him a package.

That was all.

Rocco went below. Voices sounded in an alley. He hurried out on deck and went down the gangplank. The deserted pier stretched before him, but he still wasn't safe. He wouldn't be till he reached the car, and even then the risks would be great.

"Damn!" The package felt like lead. With every step he took it seemed to grow heavier. A hundred thousand dollars worth of dope under his arm.

In spite of the cold he began to sweat. The huge doorway loomed before him. He saw the snow falling past the entrance light, the dark outside.

There was no sign of the watchman. He reached the entrance, hesitated, then stepped outside.

Anything could happen now. Nothing did. He reached the car where the others were waiting and climbed in.

"Got it?" asked Sal.

"Yeah."

"Good."

Sal started the car. It moved off slowly. The four men were still tense. The car went on, turned the corner and sped through a dark street to safety.

Sal laughed and broke the ten-

sion that held them all. "We did it, boys. The drinks are on me."

The others laughed, except for Rocco. "It's not over yet," he warned.

"What do you mean?"

"We still got to get it off our hands."

"That's arranged."

"For when?"

"Now. I'll call Marconi from Maria's. He'll meet us there and we close the deal."

"That's not a good place to do business," Rocco protested.

"The business is over. He gives us the money, and we give him the junk. That's all."

"I still don't like it, Sal."

"Okay, don't like it, but I'm the boss. We go to Maria's."

"To see Jackie?"

"You don't like her?"

"She's a tramp. I don't trust hustlers."

"Who's talking about trust?" Sal laughed. "We're going to Maria's because I said so."

They stopped at Moma's, a bar close to the waterfront frequented by longshoremen and toughs. Moma, a huge woman with a voice like a man's and as strong as one, tended bar with her daughters.

Sal, Joe and Dom got out of the car, but Rocco sat where he was.

"Better come in," Sal said.

"I'll wait here."

"What for?"

"I'm not taking any chances on losing the stuff now."

"Okay, suit yourself," Sal said and followed the others into the bar.

"Set them up," he called to Maria and went to the phone booth to contact Marconi. He came out with a glum face.

"What happened?" Joe asked him.

"I couldn't reach Marconi."

"So what do we do?"

"Wait. I'll call him back."

Sal lifted his glass and saw Jackie coming toward him.

A half hour later he went to the phone again and returned shaking his head.

"No dice," Sal said. "I couldn't reach Marconi."

"You'd figure he'd be choking the phone," Joe said. "What do we do now?"

"Wait it out. I left the number. He's got to call."

An hour passed and the call didn't come through. Sal sent out for Rocco. The snow had stopped, and a thin, white mantle lay on sidewalk and gutter.

Joe tapped on the car window. "What the hell do you want?" Rocco growled.

"Sal says to come inside."

"And leave the stuff out here? Nothing doing."

Joe shrugged and turned away to return a few minutes later with a double-shot in a tall glass. He knocked on the window again and said, "From Sal so you don't get cold."

Almost reluctantly Rocco opened the door and took the glass. "Thanks, stooge," he said.

"What do you mean by that, Rocco?" Joe demanded.

"You know better than I what I mean. Is Sal drunk?"

"No."

"You're a damned liar."

"He's feeling good, that's all."

"What about Marconi?"

"We didn't reach him."

Joe shut the door and went back into the bar.

A half hour later Rocco got out of the car. He entered the bar and found Joe and Dom sitting in a booth near the phone.

"Where's the bigshot?" he asked.

"Busy," Joe answered.

"What's that mean?"

"He's upstairs with one of the girls."

"No wonder we can't contact Marconi."

"Don't get in an uproar, Rocco. Sal's busy, but we're taking care of the phone."

"Marconi won't call."

"Who says so?"

"I do. I can feel it in my bones."

A door opened in back of the place. Sal came through it and approached the others.

"No call from Marconi?" he said. "We'd better go."

"Where to?" Rocco asked.

"To my place. We'll call from there. If he's not in, we'll wait it out. Let's go."

Sal started for the door, the others followed. Outside, they piled into the car and drove off.

Ten minutes later they stopped in front of an apartment house, entered it and climbed to the fourth floor.

Rocco was carrying the dope. Sal turned to him now and said, "Better sink the stuff."

"Where?"

"In the spot. Where do you think?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Rocco. "We should keep a load like this with us."

"Yeah, that'd be real smart. What happens if the cops bust in?"

"They don't know about it, so they're not going to bother us. It's safe, I tell you. Put it away."

"Okay, you're the boss, Sal."

"Yeah, I'm the boss."

Rocco nodded and went up the flight of stairs that led to the roof. Near the top was a loose step, with a small box screwed beneath it. Rocco lifted the step, placed the dope in the box and came down the stairs. The three of them went into Sal's apartment.

"Call Marconi, Joe," Sal ordered.

Joe picked up the phone, made the call and shrugged. "Not back yet," he said.

Sal yawned. "I figured that. You left word we're here?"

"Yes."

"Good." Sal sat down and

looked at his watch. "Late," he said and allowed his head to rest against the back of the couch. Almost instantly he fell asleep.

An hour later all four of them were asleep. Marconi didn't call.

But at nine-thirty the next morning the phone brought them all awake. Sal answered it. Marconi was on the wire.

"You finally reached us?" he said. "We've been waiting all night."

"I've been waiting a week," Marconi answered.

"Okay. You ready?"

"I'm waiting."

"We'll see you in about twenty minutes."

Sal hung up and turned to the others. "We're set," he said. "Get the stuff, Joe."

Joe left the apartment and returned a minute later. As soon as the others saw him they knew something was wrong.

"Where's the stuff?" Sal asked.

"It's gone."

"What the hell are you saying?"

"It's gone, Sal."

"Don't joke with me."

"The box is empty."

Sal shoved Joe aside and ran to the door. The others followed him out and up the stairs to the place where the dope had been hidden. The box was empty, as Joe had said. They looked at each other.

"Fifteen thousand gone," Sal moaned. "I'll kill the rat who took it. I'll kill him."

Stunned, the others stared blankly at Sal. Then all four went back to the apartment. Sal called Marconi, told him the deal was off and sat down, his face dark with anger.

"Somebody's going to pay," he swore. "Somebody's going to pay."

"Who?" said Rocco. "You got an idea who took it?"

"Not yet, but I got ways of finding out."

Rocco shrugged and lit a cigarette. "Somebody took us," he said. "I don't think we're going to find him. If you'd listened to me, it wouldn't have happened, Sal."

"Listened to you?"

"Yeah, it was your idea to put it under the step like it was nothing. That was real stupid."

Sal flushed, and Dom said, "It's gone, that's all, and we're beat."

"Beat flat," said Rocco. "I feel sick."

Dom started for the door. "Where you going?" Sal called after him.

"Home."

"What for?"

"There's no money around here."

Dom opened the door and slammed it behind him. When his footsteps faded on the stairs, Sal said, "He's the one. He clipped the stuff."

"Don't be silly," Rocco answered.

"Yeah, then why'd he leave so fast?"

"Like he said, there's no money around here."

"Not now there ain't. I tell you, he's the one."

"Come off it, Sal. He was sleeping like the rest of us."

"Yeah, how do you know?"

"How do you know he wasn't?"

"Because I never trusted him. Anyway, I'll find out for sure. I got ways."

"Okay, you got ways," Rocco said and stood up. He looked at Joe. "Coming?"

Joe looked at Sal, then nodded his head. Both of them went to the door.

"I'll see you," Joe said.

Sal didn't answer, and Rocco opened the door.

Once in the street, Joe turned to Rocco. "What do you think happened?" he asked.

Rocco shrugged. "Who knows?"

"You think it was Dom?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I know it wasn't."

"You know?"

"Yeah. Dom hasn't got the guts. Anyway, he didn't take it. Believe me."

"You seem pretty sure."

"I ought to be," Rocco answered. "Because I took the stuff."

"You?"

"That's right."

"But why?"

"Why not?"

"And you tell me this?" Joe said, almost stunned.

"Sure."

"For what reason?"

"A good one. You're tight with Marconi, right?"

"Yes."

"And he's always ready to make a fast buck?"

"Always."

"Okay. So you and me, we make a deal with him and split the money between us."

"You're crazy, Rocco. It'll get back to Sal."

"You're wrong, Joe. If we sell to Marconi cut-rate, he's not going to talk. You know that."

"What about Dom? He won't be in on it?"

"Not unless you want to split three ways, which would be kind of stupid."

Joe nodded his head. "Yeah, stupid," he said.

"So do you want to contact Marconi?"

"I'll get in touch."

"When?"

"Whenever you say."

"Make it tonight. Give me a call this afternoon on the particulars."

"Okay, Rocco. But what about the stuff?"

"It's safe." Rocco patted his pocket and grinned.

"Don't lose it."

"Don't worry. I got a special place in the cellar. Nobody could get to it in a million years."

"Good. Then I'll see you tonight."

They separated. Rocco went straight home. He lived with his brother and father. Both were at work in the family grocery.

A half hour later a knock sounded on the door. Rocco was sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee.

"Open up," he called out.

The door swung open and Sal entered, his face black with anger.

"What brings you?" Rocco asked.

"You don't know?"

"I wouldn't be asking if I did."

With a quick movement, Sal produced a gun and shoved it in Rocco's face.

"All right, rat, let's go down the cellar."

"What for?"

"You know what for. Let's go."

Calmly, Rocco stood up. They went down the cellar and walked to a bin in the back. Rocco entered it with Sal behind him. As he reached the wall, he stopped and stood motionless. Sal jammed the gun in his back.

"Make it fast," he said.

Rocco reached up and removed a loose brick from the wall and stepped aside. Sal thrust his hand into the opening and found nothing. His face dropped. Then he jammed the gun viciously into Rocco's side.

"Where's the stuff?" he demanded.

"What stuff?"

"You know what stuff. You're the one who clipped us last night."

"Me? What gave you that idea?"

"I got ways of finding out."

"Okay, if I did the clipping, where's the stuff?"

"I don't know, but I'm going tp find out," Sal said and raised the gun to Rocco's head.

"Now talk," he said. "Talk fast or I'll splatter your brains against the wall."

"I haven't got it, Sal."

"Don't give me that crap."

"I haven't got it. What makes you think I have?"

Rocco's calmness made Sal pause. "Okay," he said. "Joe told me."

"Told you what?"

"That you clipped the stuff and wanted to split with him."

"With that punk?" Rocco laughed. "He must be crazy."

"He's not crazy enough to make up something like that."

"Why not? He's crazy like a fox. You know him. He'd blackmail his own mother if he could make a dime out of it."

"What do you mean?" Sal wanted to know.

"Don't you get it? He took the stuff and he's trying to put it on me to cover up."

Sal hesitated, then lowered the gun. Rocco slipped the brick back in the way, and they went upstairs.

"A cup of coffee?" Rocco said.

Sal shook his head and started for the front door.

"What are you going to do?" Rocco said after him.

"Spray some lead," Sal answered and slammed the door as he went out.

Rocco grinned and went back into the apartment. Moments later he picked up the phone and dialed Marconi's number.

Next Month

MASK OF MURDER — A NEW *MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET*

By BRETT HALLIDAY

the case of the BEAUTIFUL BODY

by KELLEY ROOS

The painting of a beautiful woman with red-gold hair looked innocent enough to everyone but the irrepressible young Troys. They spotted a sinister flaw, and soon were up to their necks in murder.

WHEN THOSE THREE painters walked into my apartment that October morning, my heart leaped up and sang at the thought of the beauty they were bringing. Like magic the tired tan of the bedroom walls would turn into a soft and cozy blue. A few lightninglike strokes of gleaming white paint would erase the darkness of the library. And the living-room would do a quick-change from a cream-gone-sour to a deep leaf-green. Little did I know what painters are capable of.

Now it was late afternoon, and the entire house was a shambles. Not any ordinary shambles caused, for instance, by a mere hurricane. It was a chaos assidu-

© 1943, by Kelley Roos

A Short Mystery Novel featuring Haila and Jeff Troy

ously produced by three trained minds.

First, the bedroom furniture had been moved into the library. Then the library had been neatly emptied into the living-room. Now the place was covered with a film of chalk-white dust and chunks of fallen plaster. Stepladders and planks and pails and rolls of dirty canvas were the only decorations. At this point the painters had finished splashing about a thing called "sizing" and were involved in mixing colors.

It would have been a simple matter to find a shade of blue that pleased me, but to achieve one that all four of us felt was artistically right for my husband and me to slumber in was an endless and nerve-racking procedure. Finally, to avoid a filibuster, I changed my vote, and periwinkle blue won unanimously.

The ringing of our telephone started me gratefully away from my colleagues and into the living-room. But after an arduous climb over bureaus, tables, and chairs, I had barely enough strength left to squeeze between an up-ended bed and a bookcase and pick up the phone.

"Hello," I said, with a sudden *and* frightening premonition that it was Jeff calling to say that he was bringing the boss home for dinner. But it was Ellen Howell.

"Haila, darling," she said, "Roger and I are throwing a cocktail party this afternoon. You and Jeff will arrive here promptly at five-thirty or else!"

"We'd love to, Ellen, but . . ."

"Am I going to have to call a cop?"

"We'd like to come, but the painters are here! And it would take me months to get at anything to wear and . . ."

"You poor thing I know New York painters, darling. You and Jeff will come as you are and, furthermore, you will stay overnight. That's final"

"Thanks, Ellen, but . . ."

"It's final, Haila. Your place, I know, is positively uninhabitable. You will stay with us until the last square inch of paint is dry and every stick of furniture is back in place. Good-by, darling!"

"Ellen, we couldn't think of . . ." There was a click, and my objections fell on a dead wire.

I hung up and considered for a moment. Jeff and I had known the Howells for only a scant three weeks and it wasn't our usual practice to impose upon such new acquaintances. But the genuineness of Ellen's invitation—plus one look at the chaos surrounding me and one sniff of the growing smell of wet paint—quelled my impulse to call Ellen back.

Instead, I blessed Sara Daniels for introducing us to the Howells. It had all happened one night while we were seeing a play. During an intermission Jeff had spot-

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JEFF TROY
Young amateur detective

HAILA TROY *His wife*

ANGELA BRADY
Beautiful heiress

SARA DANIELS
Successful novelist

DETECTIVE LIEUT.
DRESHAR
Of the Homicide Squad

MRS. TOLLMAN *Dowager*

ROGER HOWELL
Famous publisher

ELLEN HOWELL
His striking wife

FRANK KOSTELOV
Well-known painter

ZACK JACOBY *Writer*

DOUGLAS MURRAY
Romantic artist

---

ted Sara in the lobby, recognized her from her pictures, and involuntarily, in his enthusiasm for her latest book, had shouted, practically in her ear, "That's Sara Daniels!"

She had laughed at first and then become convulsed at Jeff's embarrassed apologies. In a moment self-introductions were flying, and then Sara was introducing us to her publisher, Roger Howell, and his wife.

Something had clicked instantly. After the play we had found ourselves sitting around a table in a night club being pals. And since then the five of us had had several fine times together. . . .

I called Photo Arts and dragged Jeff away from a camera to tell him about our latest plans. He was delighted by them. "I've always wanted to eat breakfast at the Howells'," he said. "I bet they have coffee cream in their coffee."

"We could afford it, too, if you'd give up taking models out to lunch."

"From now on I'll carry my lunch."

"But I refuse to pack one for a model, too, Jeff!"

"I don't take models to lunch. They don't eat lunch. You know, their figures."

"You do; I don't. Know their figures."

"Yeah. Listen; are any of those painters cute?"

"All of them are. Jeff, our bedroom is periwinkle blue! I hope that's all right."

"Wait till you see me in periwinkle blue! That's my color; I'm the periwinkle type! Haila, suppose I meet you at the corner of Macdougal and Waverly at five-twenty."

"Why there?"

"The art show is on. Whoever's early can look at the pictures."

"All right; good-by."

It was nearly five when I hung up. I succeeded in coaxing the painters, before they left, to move a bureau into a position where I could open its drawers. I tossed some of Jeff's and my things into a small bag, dressed hurriedly, and was ready to go. As I closed the door on the ruin that had been my modest dwelling, I thought of the Howells' duplex penthouse, and I marveled at Ellen.

She was rarely at home. Her frequent impetuous and solo trips to Sun Valley and Aiken and the West Coast had left her little time for home-making. And yet, somehow, she had built a place that was exquisitely perfect in every detail. It was all so much a part of her that Roger probably never felt that she was gone while she dashed around the country.

Sara had told me Ellen's story; how she had come to New York in the late thirties and landed at once in the chorus of a smart musical show; how in no time flat she had become the girl the columnists saw most often in the most places with the most men; how the greatest shock of that decade was Ellen's marriage; how she had reveled in being Mrs. Roger Howell, handling the wealth and distinction that went with that title as if she had been born to it.

I turned off Eighth Street onto Macdougal and found that usually placid block jammed with people, too many for the sidewalks to hold. They spilled over the curbs and flooded the street. And every eye of every person was intent upon a picture.

Pictures hung from the house fronts, leaned against the walls, the stoops, the steps. Others rested majestically upon easels. Still more were in the process of creation, as quick sketch artists did amazingly reasonable facsimiles of self-centered art lovers at a few dollars per head. This was the Village Art Show.

Twice a year, in the spring and in the fall, the artists of Greenwich Village carted their work down from their attic studios and, for a small fee, exhibited them for two weeks to the public on the streets just off the Square. A surprising number of pictures were sold and, consequently, many a struggling artist was encouraged to go on working and enabled to go on eating.

I battled my way down Macdougal Street through a wide pro-

fusion of art. Landscapes in quiet and sleepy pastels. Seascapes in violent and frightening oils. Still life that ran the gamut from bowls of soup to bowls of nuts. Portraits of fat, overdressed old women and thin, undressed young ones. Lithographs and woodcuts, block prints and etchings. Beside each group stood the artist, anxiously scanning the passing crowd for some sign of interest.

I found Jeff waiting at our appointed corner gazing in rapt admiration at a large, almost full-length portrait that was propped against a fire hydrant. Puzzled, because the show didn't extend to the park side of the street, I asked, "Isn't this picture out of bounds?"

"No," Jeff said. "It's mine."

"Yours? You mean you stole it?"

"I bought it."

"Not . . . not with your hard-earned money?"

"Haila, look at it before you give me hell! It's a work of art! Look at it!"

I looked at it; I looked at it for a long time, and, without knowing why, a tiny cold tingle ran up my spine and froze my vocal cords. I glanced at Jeff, then back again to the picture.

There was certainly nothing sinister about it; it was only the portrait of a girl with a beautiful body. She stood, very tall and slender, leaning against a mantel, one languid arm stretched across

its length. Her face was a creamy white, her lips and eyes pale. The gown she wore was a murky black, its outlines lost in the drab, colorless background against which she had been painted. But three splotches of strident color high-lighted the portrait: a mass of red-gold hair, incredibly thick and lustrous, piled high on the girl's head, a wide, heavily encrusted bracelet that seemed almost to match the hair, and a brilliant red cabbage rose that was tucked in at her waist.

"You don't like it," Jeff said.

"Darling, there's something—What *is* it about it? It's strange and unnatural, somehow. It's disturbing."

"All good art is disturbing! Did you ever try to sleep during Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever?*"

"Jeff, why did you buy this picture?"

"Huh?"

"Is the artist giving away a free trip to Hollywood with every purchase?"

"Well, frankly, Haila . . ."

"Yes?"

"The artist who painted that . . . Well, I went to Dartmouth with him. He's a Dartmouth man. Same class as me."

"Oh," I said. "I hope none of your classmates raises elephants."

"Put yourself in my place," Jeff pleaded. "I'm doing the art show. Suddenly I see Douglas Murray. Haven't seen him since school. At school he just fooled around with art . . . you know, posters and cartoons. But now he is painting, really painting. And there he is with one of his pictures. What am I to do? Not buy one? Especially when this one is only ten dollars? For ten dollars, huh, I am not to encourage American art?"

"Dartmouth art."

"Very well," Jeff said stiffly. "I forwarded the good cause of a classmate and a pal. Besides, the frame is worth ten bucks."

"If this Murray is a pal of yours, why haven't you ever mentioned him, or kept in touch with him?"

"Well, frankly, we weren't exactly pals. It was just 'Good morning, Troy,' and 'Good morning, Murray,' as we passed on Dartmouth's beautiful campus. But we could have been pals. Except that we were both interested in the same waitress."

"I don't want to hear about any waitress." I took another look at the portrait, hoping I would like it better. But I didn't. "Jeff, did your waitress-competition paint this picture while under the influence of Edgar Allan Poe? Is he given to fits of wild, eerie laughter?"

"Listen, Haila; I know what upsets you about the picture. The model's a little bit out of proportion."

"It doesn't upset me aesthetically. There's something else . . ."

"But I, personally," Jeff went on, "like girls out of proportion."

"Out of all proportion," I said. "And while we're on the subject, I don't mind your eyes lighting up whenever they see Ellen Howell. But could you possibly try to keep them from popping?"

"I'm sorry," Jeff said, "but I still have that small-boy admiration for gay ladies. It's something I've never outgrown."

"Darling," I said firmly, "I know what you mean by *gay*, and you're wrong. Ellen in her time was gay, but she's settled down now. So no more innuendoes about our hostess." I stopped, and realized with a sinking heart that I would have to continue being the reprimanding wife.

"Jeff," I said, "by the time we take that picture home and get

back to Ellen's party, it will be so far ahead of us that . . ."

"Now, sweetheart . . ."

"And after my day I need a cocktail party at its peak."

"I'll take the picture to Ellen's." Jeff picked it up carefully. "C'mon."

"Jeff, no! You'll look silly walking in with that! What will people say?"

"They'll say, 'There's a man who doesn't mind looking silly.' And admire me. C'mon."

II

WE WALKED along the north side of the Square toward Fifth Avenue and the Howells'. When we stopped for a light, an elderly gentleman put on his spectacles the better to see Jeff's portrait.

"It's an original Murray," Jeff told him.

"Not very original," the gentleman said, "and who is Murray?"

I saved the gentleman from being beaten up by dragging Jeff across the street.

The building that housed the Roger Howell estate was a sleek tower of smooth gray stone crowned with the shrubs and pint-sized trees that shaded their flagstoned terrace. An elevator lifted us the sixteen stories and ejected us directly into the Howell foyer. No ordinary two-by-four foyer, but a room large enough to raise a family in, with a curving staircase in one corner and a powder-room in the other.

A Hollywood variety maid, complete to orchid uniform and starched white ruffles, led us into the library. Shades drawn against the slant of the late afternoon sun dimmed the room's elegance. Jeff slid our suitcase out of the way and tenderly propped his work of art against a paneled wall beside the fireplace.

In the living-room, behind an improvised bar, a chubby-faced bartender was up to his neck in enough fuel for a dozen parties. Jeff said mechanically, "Hiya, pal," and the bartender, just as mechanically, responded, "Hiya, bud." Then they both looked embarrassed, as if they had suddenly realized that this was Fifth Avenue, not Thoid.

Ellen Howell stepped into the living-room from the terrace. She stood there for a moment, tall and graceful, framed in the open doorway with the mild October sunshine upon her. Ellen was forty, a glamorous and exciting forty. Her pale blonde hair, aided and abetted by a honey-colored short-sleeved dress, was a dramatic contrast to the nut-brown sunburn of her skin. Her eyes, narrow and slanted like an Oriental's—were cocoa-colored and soft.

But they were the only things remotely soft about Ellen Howell. The rest of her was bright and brittle and needle-sharp.

"Well!" She was crossing the room to us, her slow smile widening in welcome. "Young Troy and wife!"

"Hello, Ellen," we said.

"Hello!" she said. "I am so sorry you could come. Besides, frankly, I throw the dullest parties. Nobody ever seems to get drunk."

"What a cute dress, Haila."

"Thank you."

"And what a cute husband! Where do you get your husbands? Will you momentarily excuse me? I've got to round up some more canapés. Sometimes I think my guests love me for my canapés and not my scandal-loving vitriolic mind. Go out on the terrace now, you two, and drink yourselves to death."

Ellen breezed off in the direction of the kitchen, and Jeff and I went through the French doors onto the terrace. Luckily, we knew it was the terrace, for now you couldn't see the flora for the human fauna. The gleam of cocktail shakers, glasses, and silver trays and the glow of the women's dresses against the darker clothes of the men made the scene bright and colorful and confusing.

Roger Howell, with the eagle eye of the perfect host, spotted us immediately and was by our side, with Sara Daniels by his. Roger was the complete antithesis of his wife. His dark hair and expensive clothes both looked as if he had forgotten to straighten them. He wore the success of being one of New York's greatest publishers exactly the same way—carelessly, entirely unimpressed with either.

And Sara Daniels hardly looked the part of the successful publisher's successful novelist. Her hair swirled and curled like the foam on a chocolate soda. Her freckled nose alone would have made a smart tailored suit look incongruous on her; it was built for pinafores and bare feet. It hardly seemed possible that Sara Daniels was the author of those witty and sophisticated novels.

Roger's good humor enveloped us like a happy snowstorm. "You'll have to meet everyone," he was saying.

"Don't introduce us at all," Jeff pleaded. "I'll get to know people. When you upset as many cocktails as I always do, you become well known in no time."

"I'm a drink-upsetter, too," Sara said. "But I only do tall ones. Roger claims I secretly own a dry-cleaning company."

"Speaking of drinks," Roger said, "how about some?"

He promptly gave our poise a boost by putting a daiquiri in one hand and a cigarette in the other and, so armed, we began a tour of the terrace.

For the next twenty minutes we were busy meeting a dozen or so assorted artists, sculptors, novelists, playwrights, poets, colum-

nists, and editors. Finally even Roger, weary and hoarse by that time, admitted that we couldn't meet everyone, and gave up.

A little later he was dragged away from us by his duties as host. All our new-found acquaintances were knotted again in tight little groups, seemingly impenetrable. Jeff and I were saved from the social disgrace of a husband and wife caught paying attention to each other at a party by the arrival of Ellen. She looked more than ever like a page out of a fashion magazine, with a smart white sharkskin jacket over her yellow dress.

"The sun goes down," she said apologetically, sticking her hands deep into the patch pockets. "Ellen gets cold."

"If I had that jacket," I told her, "I'd wear it at high noon on the Sahara desert."

Ellen laughed. "You've got me, pal. It's new and I want everyone to see it. Oh, Zack!" She extended her hand to a tall, thin young man who was passing by. He paused, and his eyebrows, which, surprisingly, didn't match his sand-colored hair, arched inquiringly.

Ellen pulled him toward us. "Haila and Jeff," she said, "I want you to know Zack Jacoby, our other house guest. As of yesterday."

Zack grinned sardonically. "I'm hardly a house guest. I'm a vulture come to roost."

"Not at all, Zack!" She turned to us. "Zack is staying with us while he writes a novel for Roger. It's going to be a wonderful book."

"It's going to be a lousy book," Zack said cheerfully.

Eventually, Jeff managed by brute force to change the subject to Troy, the would-be art collector. He made his newly acquired picture sound like a Rembrandt.

Zack said, "Haila, is it really something?"

"It's worth all of ten dollars," I admitted.

Jeff laughed at me. "My wife has no soul."

"I have eyes," I said. "That picture . . ."

"Wait!" Zack grinned. "Let El-

len and me decide, and without bias."

"Fine." I said. "I'll get the thing. It'll serve Jeff right to have you see what he thinks is art."

I elbowed my way through the jam on the terrace and passed quickly through the long, cool, green living-room into the library. The shades had been raised and the room was ablaze with sunlight. I saw our suitcase, placed neatly now in front of the portrait, almost hiding it from view. I reached behind it hurriedly and took hold of the picture's frame. I lifted it and then stood there, staring in startled amazement.

Perhaps I had been wrong to jeer at that portrait. It might have been some long-lost work of some great master. It might have been worth a thousand times the price Jeff paid for it. Evidently one of Ellen Howell's guests had been of that opinion.

For the ornate gilded frame that I held in my hands and gaped at so foolishly encircled nothing. The canvas itself had been slashed away, and a large hole yawned back into my puzzled face. I grasped the remains tightly and was moving toward the terrace, when I suddenly stopped.

A sound had come from the opposite direction, from in back of me, a strange, shuffling, scraping sound. I turned and, on tiptoe, recrossed the library and went into the foyer. Jeff's masterpiece had been ruined, but I might still, singlehanded, catch the thief.

The foyer was empty. There was no one on the curling stairway in the corner. Sounds drifted in from the kitchen, splashing water and the rattle of plates and glasses, but not the sound that I had heard before. Then, as I waited motionless, it was repeated, and this time I knew its source. The door to the powder-room in the far side of the foyer stood ajar.

I tiptoed over to the little triangular-shaped room and slipped in. A girl sprawled on the bench before Ellen's ruffled dressing table, her back toward me, her head resting in her arms on the table's top. She was very still. I spoke to her, and she didn't answer. I moved toward her and gently raised her head. Her face, as I lifted it, was reflected in the dressing table's mirrored top.

But even before I had seen the reflection of those pale eyes, wide and staring now and coated with a glassy film, and the horrible grimace that had twisted the pale lips, I knew. I knew from the mass of red-gold hair and from the creamy whiteness of her skin that it was the girl in Jeff's picture.

I knew, too, that she was dead.

III

DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT Dreshar of the New York Homicide Squad stood in the center of Ellen

Howell's living-room and batted both of his round little eyes in his almost square face. I didn't blame him. My story of Jeff's purchase of a picture painted by an old acquaintance, my discovery of the picture's theft, topped by my stumbling on the subject of that picture as she lay dead in our hostess's powder-room hadn't sounded especially credible, even to me.

Dreshar leaned closer to me, and I wished that Jeff, or anyone, was around to lend me some moral support. "Mrs. Troy," he said, "you're positive that the portrait was of Angela Brady?"

"If Angela Brady is the victim's name, then the portrait is of her," I said.

"The victim has been identified by certain guests at the party and by papers in her purse. Have you any reason to doubt that she is Angela Brady?"

"Oh, no!" I assured him hastily. "I was only being technical. You see, I never saw her before she . . . while she was alive. Neither had Jeff, my husband."

"Jeff?" A light snapped on in Dreshar's eyes. "Jeff Troy?"

"You know Jeff?"

"Not personally. But I heard about how he solved that murder down on Gay Street. And how he got the killer at that photographic studio. I've heard plenty about him. Why doesn't he join the police force, Mrs. Troy?"

Dreshar wheeled around and hied his short, heavy person to the library door, where he shouted orders to his assistant that Jeff Troy would be next on his list. Then he promptly chased me out onto the now empty terrace.

It seemed hours before Jeff slipped through the French doors to join me. I put my hand on his arm. "Jeff," I pleaded, "you're not going to get mixed up in this case, are you?"

"Arsenic," Jeff said grimly.

"Darling, on Gay Street we nearly became victims number two and three."

"When the poison first hit Angela, she must have thought she was only slightly ill, and rushed out to be near the plumbing in the powder-room. Then—"

"Murderers don't seem to like you, Jeff. In fact, they seem to hate you. So why—"

"Her glass, still loaded with arsenic, was found on the terrace. So any one of the eighty people here could have—"

"Jeff, you're my only husband!"

He absent-mindedly kissed me on the forehead. "—could have slipped the stuff in her glass. But Dreshar agrees with me that the person who killed Angela also stole my picture."

"Jeff, think! One out of eighty! You'll never solve this crime. So why try at all? Let's you and I—"

"No, Haila, not one out of eighty." I sighed, gave up, and

listened. "To get the picture in the library the murderer had to go through the living room. Where the bartender was working. Right now Dreshar has him identifying everyone who went through there between the time we arrived and the time Angela rushed to the powder-room."

"That could have been only about twenty minutes."

"Sure. It'll narrow it down to beat hell!"

"Jeff, who was this Angela? What did she do?" I asked.

"Here's all I've been able to gather: Age, twenty-eight. Unmarried. Wealthy by the will of her late father, captain of industry, Homer L. Brady. Mother died when Angela was an infant. No close relatives, as she was the only child of only children. Employed only in spending father's money, but not recklessly."

"That's not much when you're looking for a murder motive, Jeff."

"Maybe Douglas Murray knows more about her. And he'll tell me."

"I wonder why that portrait was stolen."

"I wonder, too," Jeff said.

"Troy!" Lieutenant Dreshar was back again, striding toward us. "We got a break! Only six people went through the living-room and could have got at the picture. The bartender is positive, and he's an intelligent guy."

"How are our Big Six fixed for alibis?" Jeff asked.

"Fine. During those twenty minutes Mr. and Mrs. Howell, as hosts, had legitimate reasons to go to the kitchen. Mrs. Howell also went upstairs for a coat. Jacoby, their house guest, says he went to his room to get a handkerchief."

"Not his cigarette case? But he's probably telling the truth."

"A Miss Sara Daniels went through to the powder-room to redecorate her nose. A Mrs. Tollman used the phone in the foyer to call her chauffeur. And a man named Kostelov says he went into the library to listen to a three-minute news broadcast. The bartender heard the radio."

"What happens now?" Jeff wanted to know.

Dreshar bent his head toward the living-room. "I've called a meeting. I'd like you to sit in on it, Troy. And if you'd care to Mrs. Troy, you're welcome."

I didn't care to. It wasn't my idea of heaven to sit in living-rooms with a group of people which included a winsome individual who went about slipping arsenic in daiquiris on Wednesday afternoons. But Jeff had put his arm through mine and was towing me along.

Ellen, the sharkskin jacket pulled tight around her, her hands making a muff of its long sleeves, sat huddled on the divan. Roger was on one side of her, Zack on

the other. Sara Daniels, looking frightened, sat bolt upright on the arm of a huge chair.

The other two people I hadn't met and couldn't remember even having seen earlier. Mrs. Tollman, a short, stout woman in her fifties, gave the impression that she considered these goings on nonsense and poppycock, not to mention highly irregular. Kostelov, on the other hand, seemed interested in an almost pleased way in what was about to happen.

Dreshar's voice interrupted my surreptitious inspection of Mr. Kostelov. "Most murderers," he was saying with surprising geniality to the assembled group, "are amateurs. That's how we cops explain an amateur dick like Jeff Troy beating us to the killer the two or three times he did. I'm not jealous of Troy as some of my colleagues are. I'm going to need all the help I can get on this case. So, Troy, if, during this little get-together, you want to say anything or ask any—"

Mrs. Tollman's voice boomed out: "Would it be asking too much if we got this highly uncalled-for get-together over with?"

"All right, madam," Dreshar said. His tone made it evident that he had been having his troubles with this half-dowager-, half-spinster-looking woman. His eyes left her, flicked over the faces of the others, then focused on a vase of gladioli on the long, sleek piano in the corner. "The killer knew that Angela Brady would be at this party today. That much is obvious. He came, prepared with poison—"

"If that's the case," Mrs. Tollman said, as she rose and walked toward the door, "there's no necessity of detaining me."

"Just a moment, please!" Dreshar said.

"I did not know that Angela was coming this afternoon! You, yourself, have eliminated me. Good day!"

"I would like to ask you a few questions."

"Well, be brief," snapped Mrs. Tollman. She remained standing, her hand on the doorknob.

"I'll not only be brief; I'll be blunt. In the victim's purse, Mrs. Tollman, we found a small calendar notebook. Opposite the first day of each month is your name, a dollar sign, and the figure seventy-five."

The woman drew herself erect. "How dare you to go through Angela's things!"

Ellen laughed. She threw back her head and laughed loudly. Roger turned to her sharply and then, seeing that she was amused and not hysterical, leaned back on the divan, smiling.

The blood rushed angrily to Mrs. Tollman's face. "How you can be so heartlessly flippant when that poor little child lies—"

Roger stood up abruptly. He

was not smiling now. "Mrs. Tollman, my wife and I are deeply sorry about Miss Brady. But we are hardly bereaved. Neither Ellen nor I knew her. We had never seen her before today."

More than one eyebrow in the room rose at this statement, but it was Mrs. Tollman who spoke. "That couldn't be true," she said flatly. "One doesn't invite utter strangers to one's house."

"Neither Ellen nor I invited Miss Brady to our house," Roger said.

Jeff hunched forward, and for a moment I thought he was going to speak. Instead, he looked hard at Dreshar. The detective's eyes were fixed on Mrs. Tollman, and there seemed to be a flickering smile in them. Jeff relaxed as her voice rang out again:

"It may be true that Roger didn't know Angela Brady. It may be! But Ellen certainly knew her, she can't deny that she knew her! After all, I heard what I heard!"

I saw the tiny muscles twitch under Ellen's smooth, tanned skin, but her voice was unruffled, almost amused, as she said, "What did you hear, dear Mrs. Tollman?"

Zack Jacoby rose quickly and crossed the room. He said, too politely, "Mrs. Tollman, as I remember, we were discussing you and a matter of money paid regularly once a month."

She twisted her mouth maliciously. "I see, Mr. Jacoby. You're all banded together. Roger protects his wife, of course, and you shield your attractive hostess. But you're perfectly aware of the truth. You, too, heard what Angela said to Ellen when she arrived this afternoon; you were standing right beside them on the terrace. Angela said—I remember her very words—she said, 'But you must get awfully tired, Mrs. Howell, of having my head on your shoulders.' And then the two of them went into the house and they talked for quite a while. But that remark alone implies an intimate friendship between them!"

Ellen might have ignored the challenge in Mrs. Tollman's voice, but not the puzzled look in the eyes that surrounded her. She selected a cigarette, lighted it, and let the smoke drift through her parted lips before she spoke:

"That is exactly what Angela Brady said to me. And we did go together into the house. She wanted to talk to me alone." She paused and, with a slow deliberateness, flicked the short ash off her cigarette. Then she turned and spoke directly to her husband: "You see, Roger, you were wrong. I had seen Angela Brady before today."

Dreshar, moving a step closer to Ellen, prodded her gently: "Yes, Mrs. Howell?"

Ellen said slowly, "I had seen her once before. It was several months ago at the opening of an art show uptown. Angela—I didn't know her name at the time—had had a few too many cocktails on an empty stomach. People began looking at her instead of at pictures. And since the artist was a pal of mine I took it upon myself to remove his visual competition.

"Angela and I went for a taxi ride in Central Park. The child developed a crying jag and wept all over me for a mile or two. Naturally, Mother Ellen put the baby's head on her shoulder and comforted her. It was to that ride that Angela was referring today. She was embarrassed about it, terribly embarrassed, and she wanted to apologize. But not in front of eighty-odd people. And so we talked privately." She flashed a bright smile at Mrs. Tollman. "You see?"

"I do not see! I don't believe it. No Brady—certainly no Brady woman—ever drank to excess!"

"Madam," Zack Jacoby interrupted smoothly, "the seventy-five dollars a month!"

"I do not intend to discuss my private affairs in public. Before strangers!" She pointed a stubby finger abruptly at the silent Mr. Kostelov. "Who is he? I haven't even met this man! Why is he here?"

"Yes," murmured Mr. Kostelov

agreeably, "why am I here? I admit I might have slipped poison into Angela's glass. And I might have been removing the portrait, not listening to the radio, while I was in the library. But I certainly was not aware that Angela Brady was coming to this party. And not knowing that, how could I possibly have had my arsenic with me?"

"Mr. Kostelov, in order to give Mrs. Tollman a moment to catch her breath," Dreshar said, "you might explain something to me."

"Gladly."

"Miss Brady's notebook again. Your name is scattered throughout it. As if you had had numerous engagements with her."

"Impossible!" Mrs. Tollman had already caught her breath.

"I'm sure that Angela never had anything to do at all with this man!"

I looked more closely at " this man." What I saw was a middle-aged gentleman of very unalarming proportions, thinning hair brushed throughtfully in the right places, a pair of eyes as benign as a collie's peering through thick, rimless glasses. Then I saw his hands, fine, sensitive hands, and I knew. Frank Kostelov.

Seven years before, when I had first braved Broadway, Frank Kostelov had been the artist of the moment. Every picture that he painted had been a rage. If you had a Kostelov, you were successful. I hadn't heard much of him recently.

Kostelov had ignored Mrs. Tollman's unpleasantry. "Yes," he said, speaking exclusively to the detective, "Miss Brady and I have had many engagements in the past year. She has bought several of my paintings and, since she was a young lady who"—the artist paused and smiled—"a young lady who knew a great deal about art but very little about what she liked, it took frequent trips to my studio for her to decide upon a picture."

"I beg your pardon," Mrs. Tollman said icily, "but never have I seen a picture of yours in Angela's home."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Zack Jacoby growled, making that weak sister of epithets sound like a bloody curse. "First, according to you, Ellen is a liar. And now Kostelov! You've been doing a damned good job of not explaining about Angela Brady and seventy-five dollars!"

She eyed Zack as if he were something she wouldn't deign even to step upon. "Really!" she snorted. She turned to Dreshar and said airily, "I can't see how my innocent little transactions with Angela matter in the least, but anything to help. We must all help to run down that child's brutal murderer."

"Yes, Mrs. Tollman," Ellen said, "yes."

"It's really so simple that you'll feel stupid for insisting that I explain. Angela, the dear little ninny, continually spent more money than she had. Lately I've been helping her out a bit. The least I could do. You know, I was devoted to her mother, and she to me."

"What!" Zack blurted. "That girl, with all the Brady millions, borrowed seventy-five dollars a month? My God!"

"Young man, it seems tt you are trying to avert suspicion from yourself by—"

"What do you mean?" Zack demanded angrily. "I never saw Angela Brady until today. I didn't even know her, let alone have a reason to kill her. And furthermore, in case you don't be-

lieve that, I didn't know that she was coming to this party. So I couldn't have been prepared to poison her even if I had a reason to."

"It would seem," Dreshar said quietly, "that no one knew Miss Brady was to be here. But someone knew; the murderer knew. And someone in this room is lying."

"No!"

The single word was shouted by a frightened little voice. Sara Daniels was on her feet, her hands clasped tightly together. She took a quick breath as if to go on speaking, but she didn't. She couldn't seem to quite make it.

"Take it easy, Miss Daniels," Dreshar said. "You've been so quiet that we've forgotten all about you, haven't we?"

"Sara," Roger said, going to her, "what is it? Are you all right?"

Sara seemed to look right through him. "Nobody in this room," she said, speaking slowly and emphatically, "knew that Angela was coming here today except me. I'm the only person in the world who knew."

"Tell us about it, Miss Daniels." Dreshar's encouraging smile was somehow ominous.

Sara began to speak, so quietly that I could barely hear her. "I've known Angela for years," she said. "Today while I was dressing for the party she dropped into see me. I told her that I was coming here, and she insisted that she come, too. I knew that Ellen and Roger wouldn't mind. I didn't even bother to call them to ask if I might bring her. We just came. I—I guess that's all."

Dreshar said slowly, "Miss Brady *insisted* that you bring her, you say? Did she seem to want to come for some reason other than just—well, cocktails?"

"Yes. She said it was important that she come. I asked her why. She wouldn't tell me."

"Did Miss Brady seem to know about the party before she saw you?"

"No, she didn't. I'm sure of that."

"Then she couldn't have known who would be here? Unless you told her."

"We didn't talk about that."

Without taking his eyes from Sara, Dreshar asked, "Did Miss Brady mention Mrs. Howell at all? Did she speak of their taxi ride?"

Ellen smiled. "The man's checking on me!"

Sara said, "Angela told me that she had never met either Ellen or Roger. I suppose she didn't know who it was that had helped her out of that art show. She couldn't have known it was Ellen until she saw her here today."

"Bless me," Ellen said. "No liar, I!"

"Mere routine," Dreshar murmured in Ellen's direction. Then

he went on, "Miss Brady didn't know who would be at the party. She didn't even know her hosts. And yet it was important that she get here. Strange."

"But the point is," Sara continued tonelessly, "that it was impossible for anyone but me to have known that she would be here. I'm the only one who could have come prepared to kill her."

"Sara!" Roger's voice was sharp. "Don't talk that way!"

"I had to speak. Lots of people knew I had brought her. And now"—Sara's lips tightened in their attempt to smile—"now that I've accused myself of murder—" She faltered and stopped.

Jeff jumped to his feet. "Suppose, Lieutenant, that Haila and I take Miss Daniels home."

"That'd be nice of you," Dreshar said. "But first, Troy, I'd like to go into a short huddle with you."

"May I go?" Mrs. Tollman wanted to know.

"The meeting is over," the detective announced, "and thank you."

IV

SARA DANIELS AND I sat in a cab, waiting for Jeff. We had watched Mrs. Tollman's uniformed chauffeur help her into a long-nosed limousine and haul her away. Frank Kostelov had waved to us, almost gaily, and walked off up Fifth Avenue. The Howells and Zack Jacoby were still upstairs.

"Haila, I'm just beginning . . ." Sara said, and hesitated. Quick tears sprang into her eyes and she brushed them away impatiently.

"What, Sara?"

"Poison, murder, the police—all that. It was all so impersonal at first, so removed from Angela. She became . . . the victim. She wasn't Angela Brady any more. And now I'm beginning to realize that she's dead, that it's over for her, everything's over."

"Yes, Sara."

She went on softly, "There's something else, too. There's Roger. He looked at me so strangely. As if—as if he thought that I—" Her hands clenched so fiercely that the nails dug into them.

"Sara," I said, "no. That isn't true. Neither Roger nor Ellen think for an instant that you had anything to do with it."

She wasn't listening to me; she seemed to have forgotten that I was even there. "I couldn't bear that. Roger . . . he mustn't ever . . ." She stopped. Her face was filled with confusion. "I mean, he's been so good to me. He's helped me so much with my work and been such a good friend always. I owe—just everything to him. You do see, Haila?"

The words came out in a tumbling rush, earnestly, pleadingly. But it was too late. In that one unguarded moment Sara Daniels

had given away her jealously kept secret. And I wondered then why I hadn't known it from the first, that Sara was in love with Roger Howell.

I reached over and took her hand and pressed it. "Yes," I said, "I see."

Jeff slid into the space between us and said, "Tell the man where you live, Sara."

"Seventy-fourth, driver, please. Just off Fifth."

"Sara," Jeff said, "is there anyone you know—not at the party—who was a good friend of Angela's?"

Sara frowned. "Angela was strange about her friends. I've known her for years; we were at school together. We wore each other's clothes, that sort of thing. And still I never felt that I knew Angela as well as I do Haila now. There's only one person who might have known Angela really well."

"Who?"

"Douglas Murray."

"Well, well," Jeff said. "My favorite artist."

"He was more than Angela's favorite artist. He was her favorite man. She was in love with him for a long time, for years. I don't think she ever stopped, although she tried."

"Why? Couldn't Doug see his way clear to loving Angela?"

Sara shrugged. "For a while he did, I guess. And then, suddenly, *bang!* He was all through, finished with her."

"Angela never knew why. Oh, she kept on seeing him. He would let her feast her poor eyes on him occasionally. But he was definitely bored."

Jeff said, "I gather you don't like Doug."

"Frankly," Sara said, "I detest him."

"Why?"

"Why? On general principles. Or on principles too numerous to mention. The way Angela ran after that man made me want to cry. Or to spank Angela."

"Did she pose for Murray often?"

"That picture you bought, which I never saw, is the only one she ever posed for in all her life. I'm sure of that. Artists and photographers were always after Angela—that wonderful hair and skin—but she always refused to model for them. She thought it was silly."

"Jeff," I asked, "what does Dreshar think about your picture having been stolen?"

"He thinks that if we find it, we'll solve the murder."

"Darling, you looked at it more than I did. Can't you remember anything about it, anything that might mean something?"

"No, damn it. But that picture is still in the Howells' apartment. Nobody left by the elevator after we arrived until the police came.

And nobody left by the only other way to leave—through the kitchen to the service elevator and the fire stairs. There were always at least two or three maids in the kitchen."

"And no one," I said grimly, "sneaked that picture out on his person. That big lug who frisked me! I'll sue him the next time we meet."

"It seems strange," Sara said, as the cab swung to the curb before a small, expensive-looking apartment house, "that the picture could still be at Ellen's and the police not find it."

"Yeah," Jeff said. "Mr. Dreshar is very much embarrassed."

The driver opened the door and Sara stepped out onto the sidewalk. "Won't you come in?"

"Thanks, no, Sara," Jeff said. "Unless you—"

"Oh, I'm all right, Jeff! I'm fine. Thanks for seeing me home." She smiled at us, and nodded, and ran into the house.

The driver turned to us: "Where to now?"

"Wait a minute." We waited a minute, and then Jeff nudged me and said, "Look."

A nondescript car slowed to a stop across the street and a nondescript gentleman slumped comfortably under its wheel, as if preparing himself for a long vigil.

"The eyes of the law," I said, "are upon Sara Daniels. Is that what you were waiting for?"

Jeff nodded. To the driver he said, "The nearest drugstore. I want to make a phone call."

"Darling," I said, "you don't think Sara killed Angela Brady, do you? She couldn't have done it! Not Sara!"

"It was more convenient for Sara to have poisoned her than for anyone else. You'll have to admit that. Even Dreshar admits that." The cab stopped again. "Wait here, Haila."

"Whom are you going to call?"

He answered me a moment later when he returned: "Doug Murray. But the cops beat me to it. They're with him now." He slammed shut the cab door. "Driver, Eleven, seventy-one Park Avenue."

"Jeff, whom do we know on Park Avenue?"

"Mrs. Josephine Tollman."

"Oh, no, Jeff! No more of her!"

"Haila, it looks bad for your pal, Sara."

"All right. Eleven, seventy-one Park."

"Or maybe I shouldn't fool around with this case, after all. Maybe I'll just prove that Sara did do it."

"Eleven, seventy-one Park!" I yelled to the cabby.

As we walked through the two-story arch and into the elaborately landscaped courtyard of the Park Avenue apartment house, I began to have growing doubts about our mission. My face began to hurt in

anticipation of a butler slamming a door in it. I had heard from Ellen that Mrs. Tollman thought the "400" had dwindled to a mere "001," i.e., Mrs. Josephine Tollman, and, consequently, she never entertained.

And the elevator boy's secret grin when we announced our destination proved my fears of a high-grade bounce were well founded. But I held my peace; Jeff had a way with butlers, second footmen, and the guardians of the reserved-seat section at Yankee Stadium.

The elevator deserted us at the fourteenth floor, and I followed Jeff to a door numbered 1409. It stood slightly ajar, and under Jeff's hardly high-society knocking, it swung back completely. And the two of us stood gaping into Mrs. Josephine Tollman's Park Avenue establishment.

It consisted of one room, tiny and stuffy and square. A white iron bed filled half of it, a chest of drawers and a rocking chair took care of the remaining half. The one window looked out on a dreary air shaft. And yet the room was undeniably hers; the flowered print that Mrs. Tollman had worn that afternoon lay carefully spread out on the bed.

Now I understood her social reticence, her refusal to entertain. And I felt a flash of pity for this woman whose fortune and position were merely a state of mind.

She had to have a Park Avenue address even if it meant living in a room usually inhabited by a surplus servant of a family below.

I wanted to run; I didn't want to face the lady's embarrassment at being discovered at home. Then I thought of Sara, and I nudged Jeff into action.

He cleared his throat. "Mrs. Tollman?" he called.

"Who is it?" Her voice, coming from behind a door in the side wall, implied that there was no right for it to be anyone. She came into the room, rubbing her hands on a small linen towel. Her face turned a dull, angry red.

"This is unspeakable of you!" she spluttered.

Then Jeff, in spite of his intentions, said exactly the wrong thing: "What the hell, Mrs. Tollman; this is a swell little place!

You ought to see the holes in the wall I've lived in!"

"Get out of here!"

"It's fine of you, I think," Jeff went on, "to live so economically, to rent a car and chauffeur by the hour instead of keeping your own. All so that you could give Angela money. There aren't many people who'd do a thing like that."

Mrs. Tollman stared at Jeff, a wariness in her eyes. "Yes," she said, "but Angela's mother was my dearest friend, she—"

"I wish," Jeff said, sighing, "that the police were capable of judging character."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, he said sadly, "they'll probably refuse to believe you. They'll say that Angela was blackmailing that money out of you. They might even decide that, because you got tired of being blackmailed, you poisoned her."

The woman sank down on the iron bed. Her face was the color of concrete.

"Please don't worry," Jeff said hastily. "As long as you can prove that you're telling the truth, it'll be all right."

"I—I wasn't telling the truth." Her voice was almost inaudible. "I haven't given Angela any money. She's been giving it to me."

"Oh," Jeff said.

"Yes." The woman's back suddenly straightened and she glared at us, her old self once again. "She's been giving me a monthly allowance since my husband died three years ago. Except for Angela I would have had to go upstate and live with a brother of mine whom I consider an unearthly bore. Now, I suppose, I shall be forced to do just that."

"Maybe in Angela's will—"

"No; oh, no! I've read her will. Every cent to charities, all kinds of charities! Homer Brady's fortune scattered to the four winds. Angela had no brain for finances, none at all. She was precisely like my late husband, very attractive, but no brains!"

Jeff asked conversationally, "Do you by any chance know an artist named Douglas Murray?"

Mrs. Tollman looked at him sharply. "That horrible young man! No breeding!"

"Really?" Jeff asked seriously. "No breeding? Of any kind?"

"None at all. Angela was infatuated with him, she followed him around like a giddy girl. I was delighted when he threw her over. If he'd been in love with her, she would never have been able to break it off. He's such a violent young man. He quite terrifies me."

The unconcealed distaste in her voice made me want to get away, and I was deeply relieved when Jeff finally bowed us out. The door slammed after us as if Mrs. Tollman were attempting to slam shut the secret of her double life as well.

Outside, the wind was stream-

ing up Park Avfnue on its way to the Bronx. We found a taxi.

Jeff pushed me through the cab door and climbed in. Then, putting his arm around my shoulders, he said softly, "Haila."

"Yes, darling," I murmured, burrowing closer to him.

"As far as I can see, Mrs. Tollman had no possible reason to kill Angela."

I sat up and shoved him away. "Really?"

"Nobody goes around killing his sole support. So that eliminates her. And Roger and Ellen and Zack didn't know Angela well enough to kill her. That leaves Kostelov and—"

"And Sara," I finished unhappily.

"Don't give up. At least, let's call on Kostelov."

The eminent Mr. Kostelov had evidently forsaken the Village's artistic group, for he lived in Chelsea on West, very west, Eighteenth Street. His house was an old brownstone that looked lost in a surrounding flock of huge warehouses. The artist's name on the top of the column of name plates showed that we would have at least five flights of stairs to climb before we reached his studio. The clicking of the lock-release answered Jeff's ring and we started climbing.

Frank Kostelov, chatting amiably and smiling, ushered us into his studio. One glance around the place proved to me that our host was one hundred per cent painter, which left no percentage for housekeeping.

The artist waved us to a long wood bench. "I have no comfortable chairs," he said, "for a reason. If visitors are comfortable they stay, and if they stay I get no work done."

He added quickly, "I mean working-hour visitors, of course, not you two. Or not Detective Lieutenant Dreshar, who just left me a few minutes ago. Nice chap, that Dreshar."

"Yes," Jeff said. "But I suppose, since he just left, you're tired of talking about murder."

"Not at all. Incidentally, I told Dreshar a little something that might interest you."

"What's that?"

"I lied this afternoon," Kostelov answered, smiling cheerfully. "Not a word of truth in anything I said."

"Those engagements I had with Angela Brady did not concern my pictures. She never bought a picture of mine in her life."

"But if your relationship with Angela had nothing to do with business . . ."

Kostelov chuckled. "No, no! It was business, all right. Completely business, but not art." The mirth vanished from his face, leaving it angry and bitter. "Not art at all."

Striding to a table, he picked up a thick sheaf of drawing papers.

With a fierce motion he scattered them on the floor before us. And a dozen Angela Bradys stared up into our faces. They were only small water colors, but the likeness was unmistakable.

My eyes moved rapidly from one sketch to the next. The faces were all alike; the clothes all different. There was Angela in evening gowns, in tailored suits, in riding habit, and negligee.

"Do you," Kostelov asked sardonically, "recognize the work of a fine artist, one Frank Kostelov?"

"But," I stammered, "these look like fashion plates!"

"Precisely, Mrs. Troy; precisely. Kostelov paintings hang in every gallery in America. But now it seems that I am passé, and no longer do people buy my work. So I secretly earn my living by designing misses' wear for a wealthy young lady. Do you blame me for lying this afternoon? Other artists may flaunt their prostitution in public. Not I."

"I see," I said, not seeing at all. If I could have designed clothes like this man I would have screamed it from the housetops. But then I wasn't Frank Kostelov, the painter.

"Angela was considerate," he was saying. "She kept the designer of her clothes, which apparently were the envy of all her friends, a secret. I owed a great deal to Angela."

"In fact," Jeff said slowly, "you had every reason to want her to go on living."

"Yes." Kostelov was smiling again. "That's why I told this to Dreshar and you. It entirely eliminates me as a suspect, I should say."

Jeff nodded as he rose. "Well, good-by, Mr. Kostelov, and thanks."

"Good-by," said the artist, "and thank you."

It had turned into nighttime while we were in Kostelov's studio. The streets were quiet and empty and shrouded in semiblackness.

"Jeff," I said gloomily, "we're doing fine. Mrs. Tollman was a beautiful suspect until we called on her. And so was Kostelov. If we keep this up—Well, we're going to eliminate everyone *but* Sara. All we've done is make things worse for her."

"Yes," Jeff agreed solemnly. "I wonder if Doug Murray is still at home."

"Darling, your classmate certainly couldn't have been voted The Most Popular. Sara Daniels detests him, Mrs. Tollman loathes him, and even the mild Mr. Kostelov had no kind word for him."

"Right or wrong, he's my classmate."

"Jeff, is it like Dartmouth men not to love a beautiful, rich honey like Angela Brady?"

"Sure; we marry wives for their tidiness. Haila, since Murray painted that picture of Angela, he

ought to know more about it than anyone alive. If it holds a secret, which it must, Murray knows the answer. Let's call on him now, shall we?"

"By all means," I said. . . .

V

DOUGLAS MURRAY lived at No. 18 Perkins Alley, a short, twisted little street in the lower part of the Village. There were no lights in the small, dingy house except on the first floor, and, as we stood for a moment on the narrow sidewalk, a shadow passed before those lighted windows. The name plates in the vestibule showed that the first floor belonged to Murray, but there was no answering click to our persistent ringing.

Jeff tried the door; it was unlocked. I followed him into the hallway and stood behind him as he knocked on the only door the floor boasted.

Finally it was flung open by a tall young man who blocked the doorway by casually extending an arm across it and leaning on that arm. He was extraordinarily handsome, with coal-black, curling hair and a smooth, brown skin that made his perfect teeth seem even more perfect and his deep blue eyes bluer.

"Hiya," Jeff said.

"Hello, Troy," Murray said, making no move to invite us in. If this was the way one Dartmouth man greeted another, give me the Brooklyn Institute of Refrigeration Engineering.

Then, somehow, there was a great flurry of introducing and handshaking and backslapping, all maneuvered by Jeff; and suddenly I found myself standing beside him in Murray's apartment, while Mr. Murray himself stood outside in the hall and stared at us in bewilderment.

"Come in, Murray," Jeff said, smiling cordially, "and sit down."

Murray didn't return Jeff's smile. Sarcastically, he said, "Thanks, I will." He closed the door behind him. "But I can only stay a minute. Won't you sit down, too? For a minute?"

The room we stood in was a combination living-room, dining-room, bedroom, and studio, furnished entirely with odds and ends and bits and pieces. Three long windows filled one end of the room, and a tremendous fireplace with an unusually high mantel another. Two closed doors on the far side probably closeted a kitchen and a bath.

Murray was watching us, his hands deep in his pockets. "Did you come for a refund on that picture?" he asked.

"Then you know what happened?"

"Yeah. The police paid me a call this afternoon." He lit a cigarette, then watched the glow of the match fade out. "Angela Brady

was poisoned." He tossed the match into the fireplace and leaned an arm on its mantel.

I said, "That's where she posed when you painted her, isn't it?"

He nodded but didn't speak.

Jeff asked, "When did you do that picture, Murray?"

"Last week."

"Do you have any other portraits of her around?"

"No. That's the only one she ever let me do," he said in a staccato voice. "Well, it's been nice seeing you again, Troy. Drop in again and we'll talk college. Next week, say."

"Thanks," Jeff said, getting up.

"Just a second. Tell me something, Troy. I wasn't at that party this afternoon. Why should the police question me? And why are you questioning me?"

"Well, as for me," Jeff said, "I was hoping you'd tell me what there was about that portrait that made the murderer steal it. Slipping the poison into Angela's glass was a cinch compared to ripping the canvas out of its frame without being seen doing it. It was damned important; the murderer *had* to do it. Why? Angela knew, possibly; she can't tell me. The murderer knows; he won't tell. And you should know; you painted the picture. What was there in it, Murray, that we couldn't see? Tell us that and we'll go."

"There was nothing in it," Murray said angrily. "It was just a picture . . ."

Jeff said slowly: "Murray, in that picture of Angela she was wearing a black dress. Could there have been anything about it that—"

"It was just a dress." Murray was impatient.

"And she had a gold bracelet on her right arm."

"A plain bracelet. Nothing unusual about it."

"There was a rose—"

"Listen, Troy!" Murray was being openly unpleasant for the first time. "Can't we forget about that damn' picture? And talk about—"

Suddenly all the lights in the room went out, plunging them in total darkness.

"Damn" Murray said. "The fuse blew again. It's happened twice this week. Current in this apartment is too strong or something. I'll have to have it checked."

Murray had got up and was moving restlessly about the room. I could hear his soft footsteps on the bare floor somewhere behind me. I could hear his soft, measured breathing. It gave me a queer, uncomfortable feeling to know that he was there, close to me, moving nearer, and not to be able to see him. Then the doorbell shattered the silence . . . one, two, three! I jumped.

Jeff said, "Is the buzzer near me? I'll get it." I had never heard anyone so eager to cooperate.

But our host wasn't having any. "Sit still!" The words were not a suggestion; they were a command. "I'll get it. It's nobody."

"Nobody?" Jeff said. "That's doubtful."

"I mean it's just the damn' fool upstairs. I know his ring. He's always forgetting his key."

"The front door is open," Jeff said.

"Will you sit down?" Murray said.

"I always rise to meet somebody," Jeff said primly.

There were three light taps on the apartment door. Murray was moving and so was Jeff. Murray's voice, unnecessarily high, said sharply, "Will you sit down, Troy, before you—"

Across the room there was a sudden confusion of quick footsteps. I heard the door being wrenched open, and then I heard an unpleasant thud. It was followed promptly by a surprised yelp, and something shook the floor as it landed heavily. The door slammed.

I jumped to my feet and peered into the thick darkness. "Jeff!" I howled.

My answer was the rush of more footsteps, the opening of another door. And a few seconds later Jeff's voice came from the sidewalk in front of the house. "Someone came out of here!" he was shouting. "But he's made a clean getaway."

A lamp was switched on in the room, and I blinked in the suddenness of its glare. Douglas Murray, his hand still on the light cord, was smiling strangely.

"Just put in a new plug," he

said. "Everything's all right now."

Jeff stood in front of the open door. He was holding a handkerchief to his face, and that handkerchief was rapidly turning crimson.

"Jeff!" I cried, running to him. "You'll bleed to death! Quick—I'll make a tourniquet!"

"You can't put a tourniquet on a nose," Jeff said ungraciously, his eyes on Douglas Murray.

The smile had vanished from Murray's lips, but I had the feeling that it was still there, lurking deep inside him.

"Sorry as hell about your nose," he said. He turned to me: "He ran into the door."

"That was no door," Jeff said bitterly. "It was a bona fide fist."

"Really?" the artist murmured. "I suppose you frightened my visitor, whoever it was, and he swung in self-defense."

"Of course you have no idea who it was?"

"None at all. I'll thank you, Troy, not to scare people away from my door after this."

"You have no idea how sorry I am that I scared that person away." Jeff got a firmer grip on his nose. "So long, Murray."

"Good night," Douglas Murray smiled.

Jeff's nose stopped bleeding at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Eighth Street. He breathed through it cautiously, twiggled it experimentally, then gave me his diagnosis.

"It will never be the same again," he said, "but that will be an improvement. I need a medium-raw steak to build my blood bank back up."

VI

WE FOUND A little bar and grill on Eighth Street, settled outselves in a booth, and ordered. It wasn't until I had disposed of two large chicken sandwiches and watched Jeff fight his way through a large, tough steak that I could bring myself back to the nasty business at hand.

"Jeff," I said, "Murray was lying, wasn't he? It wasn't the man upstairs who—"

"Of course not."

"It was somebody connected with the murder."

"I'd say so, Haila."

"It was the murderer himself!" I said.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Jeff, that's wonderful! Don't you see?"

"See what?"

I was so excited I could hardly keep seated. "Darling, listen! If we're right, if that person was the murderer, then the murderer isn't Sara!"

Jeff raised his eyebrows quizzically, then quickly lowered them and patted his nose. "Huh?"

"Look. Whoever hit you knocked you down! I heard you fall."

"An unpleasant sound, wasn't it?"

"But don't you understand?" I asked impatiently. "Little Sara couldn't knock you down! Why, she could hardly even reach your nose! Therefore, Sara isn't the murderer!"

I sank back in the booth and lit a cigarette. Suddenly I felt fine. Who said a woman's place was in the home? Not this woman. This woman's place was out in the world proving that innocent people were innocent.

"Haila," Jeff said, "you're right. It couldn't have been Sara who hit me. Even if she was the person at the door. Because it was Douglas Murray who hit me."

"Sure. That's how important it was to him to prevent us from identifying his caller. A caller, incidentally, whom he expected. Remember how he tried to brush us off when we arrived? And how he tried to get rid of us? And then he yelled my name at the top of his lungs when the person knocked on his door—to warn that person."

"That person," I said slowly, "knows us and didn't want us to see him. That definitely proves, I should think, that it was the murderer."

"It does for my money. The killer must have purposely made his date with Murray at a late hour. And Murray arranged for the lights to go out to prevent his being seen by us. Probably ripped out the plug. It must have been damned important that he talk to Murray, to take any chance at all."

"I guess there isn't much doubt that Murray is mixed up in this now. But how? Through the picture."

"At least through the picture. Murray knows the secret of it. He must know why it was stolen. But Murray isn't talking."

"Jeff, we've got to find that picture!"

"Yeah," he agreed. "It couldn't have left the Howells' apartment. That's a fact, an established fact." He picked up the check and looked for a waiter. "So let's be getting along to the Howells' apartment."

As we stepped from the elevator into the Howells' foyer, voices drifted to us from the terrace. We decided that before we tore their house apart we should pay our respects to our host and hostess.

Ellen, a dark coat thrown around her shoulders, was reclining in a deck chair, a tall glass on the table at her side. Roger leaned against the parapet, his eyes on the lights across the East River in Brooklyn. Pacing back and forth was Zack Jacoby, a restless, plunging figure in the darkness.

There was another form, too, a small one huddled deep in a chair in the corner. It half rose as we

stepped out onto the terrace.

"Jeff! You're back! Did you . . . were you able to . . ."

Sara leaned forward, and the light from the living-room fell full on her face, sharpening the tense lines that a murder had etched upon it, deepening the shadows under her big, frightened eyes.

Jeff shook his head. "No luck, Sara; sorry."

She drew back into the shadows until her face was just a pale oval. "I'm not brave," she said, "not a bit brave. I keep telling myself that I'm innocent and there's nothing to be afraid of, but . . ." Her voice faltered before it began rising in hysteria. "But Dreshar doesn't believe me . . . he thinks I killed Angela; he . . ."

Roger was across the terrace, sitting on the arm of Sara's chair, her hand held tight in his. He turned to Jeff; his voice was a strange mixture of anger and impatience. He said, "Jeff, you didn't find anybody with a motive to kill Angela?"

"No," Jeff said.

"Nor anyone who knew that she would be here today?"

"No."

"There it is," Sara said, very quiet now. "It always comes back to me."

Roger stood up. He walked stiffly across the flagstoned floor and stopped before Jeff. "Before you find out for yourself," he said evenly, "I'd better tell you. I should have spoken long ago. I knew that Angela would be here this afternoon."

There was complete stillness on the terrace then, as if not only our dismal little group but the entire city had caught its breath and was waiting for Roger Howell to go on. But Roger simply stood there, his hands stiff and straight at his sides, saying nothing.

It was Ellen who broke the hush. She said softly, anxiously, "Roger, how? How did you know that she would be here?"

Roger didn't look at his wife; he made no move. His eyes were still on Jeff when he answered. "I talked to Sara on the phone just before the party. She told me that she was bringing Angela."

Sara was on her feet. Alarm and consternation showed in every taut line of her body, silhouetted faintly against the dimmed-out lights of the surrounding buildings. "No, that isn't true! Roger, I didn't phone you, you know I didn't! Why do you say that?"

Ellen's voice, terribly calm, came from the shadows: "Yes. Why do you say that, Roger? When it isn't true."

She waited. The rest of us sat there, filled with a breathless expectancy, and waited. Seconds slipped by with a painful, dragging slowness, and still Roger made no answer. Ellen rose and, holding the dark cloak tight about

her, walked to the parapet. She leaned against it and looked out over the city.

At last she turned back. "Roger," she said, her voice so low we could scarcely hear her, "you're doing this to protect Sara, aren't you? Roger, you—you're in love with Sara."

Roger turned sharply toward his wife, and stopped midway. I could see his face clearly now. I saw the quick denial that flew into his eyes and started to his lips, and then I saw it disappear. I think Roger knew in that moment that he was in love with Sara Daniels, knew because, for the first time, it had been put in words. And Ellen Howell knew, too.

She jerked away from the parapet and then, swiftly, turned back to it again, her face averted. But in that brief second the light had fallen upon it and in its glare I had seen the real Ellen. The gay brightness that was a part of her had been stripped off as though it were a papier-mâché mask. It left a woman's face, suddenly old, suddenly tired, filled with sharp hurt.

"I didn't know," she said softly. "I should have known long ago. I haven't been much of a wife, have I, Roger? I don't live with you; I visit with you. The way I would some distant cousin. I've been so busy with other things. I've had so little time for you. For years I've been taking you for granted. I—I can't blame you, Roger. It's all so clear to me now."

It was the other Ellen's voice that was speaking now. It wasn't the brittle, vital tone that flipped off caustic observations and biting innuendoes. It was choked and husky, and there were bitter tears in it.

Then Sara Daniels came alive. She ran across the terrace to Ellen's side, and her arm went around the other woman's shoulders.

"No, Ellen, no; you're wrong!" she cried. "Believe me, Ellen. Oh, I've been in love with Roger for years, forever. You've always known that, Ellen; everybody's known. Everybody except Roger. He's never seen anyone but you, Ellen; you must know that. I—"

She looked around at the rest of us, helplessly, beseechingly, before she turned and ran. Her heels clicked across the stone terrace, were muted on the thick carpets of the rooms inside. We heard the loud, insistent buzz of the elevator bell and finally the sliding of its doors.

Roger, his face clouded with bewildered misery, was watching Ellen. We were all watching Ellen, waiting for her to do something, wondering what it would be.

Suddenly her arms went high above her head, and we heard her breathe in deeply. "What a glorious night!" she said. "A night to make small boys run away to join

circuses and old men try to get in the Navy!" Her voice was brittle and bright again, the mask back firmly on her face.

Jeff laughed, then said, "Let's call the murder off on account of darkness and go to bed; shall we?"

"Yes," Ellen said, "let's."

We left Roger and Zack in the library half-heartedly looking for something to read. Ellen led Jeff and me up the curving staircase to our room, wished us pleasant dreams, and was gone.

It was a wonderful room, alive with Ellen's touches, and as I unpacked my little bag, my mind was full of her. Then I became aware of Jeff, sitting on the canopied bed, his eyes two question marks of worry and wonder.

That did it. Now I was off again on a mental goose chase. Who, what, why, where? Who killed Angela Brady? What was the motive? Who had been at Douglas Murray's? What did Murray know and why wouldn't he talk? What was it about the picture, and where was the picture?

"Jeff," I said, "it seems fantastic to me."

"Huh?"

"The terrific chance the killer took when he stole your picture. Anyone could have walked into the library and seen him there in the broad daylight as he ripped—"

"Broad daylight," Jeff repeated. "No, Haila; when we left the picture there, the library was dark, very dark."

"Yes, it was then. I remember that. But later, when I went back and found the picture gone—"

"It was broad daylight!" Jeff was on his feet, excited. "Haila, are you sure?"

"Absolutely sure," I said slowly. "Jeff, why would the murderer raise the shades? Or, if it was someone else who raised them, why didn't the murderer pull them down before he—"

"Haila, I'm ashamed of myself!"

"Why?"

Jeff was at the window; he pulled the shade clear to the bottom. Then, stepping to the bed table, he picked up one of the morning tabloids that had been so considerately supplied us. He spread it wide and held it up.

"About the size of the canvas, huh, Haila?"

"About. What are you doing?"

"I'm showing you a trick that's as old as—as old as window shades."

He went back to the window. He thrust one edge of the rectangular paper into the place where the shade met the roller. Holding it with his left hand, he jerked the cord with his right. The shade rolled slowly up, wrapping the newspaper inside it as it went. I watched it disappear.

"Darling!" I said. "Maybe you're right!"

"I could be," Jeff admitted. "And unless the killer's had a chance to destroy it, it's still there. Let's go and see."

As we opened the door we heard Roger and Zack, speaking softly to each other, on their way up the stairs. Jeff and I quickly ducked back into our room. The two men said good night, there was a click of a light switch in the hall and the sound of closing doors.

After a moment Jeff said, "C'mon, Haila."

The two floors of the Howells' apartment were cushioned in deep silence as Jeff and I tiptoed through the wide hallway toward the stairs. Hampered by the unfamiliarity of our surroundings and by the darkness, it took us an eternity and a half to reach the library.

With my arms outstretched like a sleepwalker's, I moved around the room until my hand touched a floor lamp, and I clicked it on. Our eyes flew instantly to the two long windows. Their blinds still remained at the top of the frames with the full, figured draperies drawn almost together over them.

Jeff crossed the room to the nearest window; he pushed back the curtains and grasped the cord of the shade. I held my breath as it unrolled. The identity of the murderer, the vengeance of Angela Brady's death, the whole solution of the crime seemed to

hang on that descending blind.

It was a third of the way down before the splotch of black began to show, and then the white that was the mantelpiece in Douglas Murray's living-room, and then the golden-red that was Angela's hair. The picture was ours again.

"Jeff," I said. "If the picture's so important, why did the mur-

derer hide it in such an obvious place. Obvious, at least, to you. Why didn't the murderer rip it into little pieces, for instance, and dump it down the plumbing?"

"Remember that the bartender was in the living-room then, the maids were in the kitchen, more guests were apt to step into the foyer at any moment, and maybe Sara was in the powder-room just then. The killer was lucky to get the picture out of the frame without being seen. He probably heard someone coming and rolled it up the blind. Then never got a chance to sneak it out and destroy it. C'mon; let's take a look at it."

Jeff spread the canvas on a desk, smoothed it out, and we hunched over it in eager silence. I could have wept with disappointment, and it was absurd of me. I had looked at this painting before and remembered what I had seen there.

And yet, somehow, now I had expected it to be all-revealing, an end and an answer in itself. I had wanted to pick the murderer's face from the shadows of the background, to lift it as you used to lift strange, hidden animals out of an old-fashioned picture puzzle.

Somewhere in the painting was still that disturbing, inexplicable thing that had startled me when I first saw it. I stared at it again until my eyes burned. There was still that something that was wrong and unnatural hidden there, and it was still too deeply hidden for me to unbury it.

"Jeff," I said, "do you see anything? Anything at all?"

He shook his head disconsolately. "No. I don't know why I thought I would. But someone who knew Angela Brady well might be able to—" He stopped, reached across the desk, and grasped a telephone directory. "Kostelov," he said.

Jeff thumbed through the directory, and the rustling of the pages sounded thunderous in the silence of the room. These library walls seemed not only to have ears, but eyes as well. I had the uncanny feeling that every move we made, every word we uttered, was being noted.

I walked around the room gingerly searching behind chairs and in corners, knowing, even as I did it, that no one was there but us. Thrusting open the door, I peered into the shadows of the foyer and the stairs. No sound or movement broke the blanket of quiet dark. And yet the feeling of watchful eyes upon me persisted, making me nervous and alert.

Jeff said, "Mr. Kostelov has no phone. We'll drop in, unceremoniously, on him. Murder knows no manners."

We left the room as we found it, telephone book back in place, shades drawn to the top, draperies spread over them. Jeff grasped the rolled canvas tightly

in one hand and buzzed for the elevator with the other. Evidently we were to get out of the apartment without anyone having been aware of our explorations.

But it wasn't until we were on the street in the cool night air that I was able to shake off that sensation of sharp, hostile eyes boring into the back of my head. We found a taxi manned by a sleeping cabby at the corner. Jeff gave him Kostelov's address on West Eighteenth Street and we climbed in.

VII

WE WERE NEARLY at Kostelov's when I saw reflected in the driver's mirror the lights of another car. It was the first sign of life we had encountered for quite a while, and I felt better for meeting up with it. The lights kept bouncing merrily out at me from the mirror for a block or two, and then, as they turned a corner after us, Jeff leaned forward and spoke to the cabby:

"Turn north at this corner, east at the next."

"Jeff," I said, "you think it's following us?"

"I'm making sure."

After our driver had made the two specified turns there was no possible doubt that we were being tailed. That car was still with us, not too close, not too far behind.

"What now?" I asked Jeff.

"I think," he said, "we'll follow it."

"Follow it! Darling, we can't follow something that's following us! That's eating our cake and having it, too."

Jeff slid into the collapsible seat behind the driver and went into a quick huddle with him. After a moment he turned back to me: "Hold on, Haila."

Our cab had been moving slowly down a long, unbroken block between Ninth and Tenth Avenues; our adversary was about fifty yards behind us. Without warning, our driver jammed his foot on the gas and went screeching into a U-turn, and we were suddenly roaring toward the other cab.

It faltered indecisively for a moment, then leaped forward. As we passed, there was only a flick of time to stare into it. I could not even be sure that I had seen a figure crouched in the back. Then, suddenly, we had swung around into another U-turn that made the tires wail.

But our maneuver had worked; we now pursued our pursuer. There was no doubt about that; it was running for its life, tearing through the silent streets, rounding corners, and circling blocks with no rhyme or reason except to escape. Past warehouses and garages and freight depots we tore after it. Among the columns that held up the West Side Highway

we played our game of hide-and-seek.

Then we lost it. We had crazily shot around a corner that it had unmistakably turned, and it was gone. The street, walled by immense warehouses and dismally dark, was empty.

"Damn!" Jeff said.

"No," I said. "Look!"

Our prey had come to a stop in the darkest spot on all that dark street. But the movement of a rear door opening had caught my attention. I saw a shadow dart across the sidewalk and disappear into the gloomy wall of a warehouse. The cab started up and rolled leisurely away, minus its fare.

Our driver had seen what we had; our cab raced to that spot and stopped. Opposite us, across the street, was the narrow aperture of a driveway leading to the back of the warehouse. It was black as pitch.

I slid across the seat as Jeff opened his door and stepped out. With a gentle shove he pushed me back. I put my foot down firmly.

"Jeff, you're not going to mess around in the black bowels of that building all alone!"

"I won't be alone. That guy's in there."

"Yes!" I said, and moved toward the sidewalk.

"Haila, listen!" Jeff handed me the roll of canvas that was our memento of Angela Brady. "You've got to take care of this. Take it on up to Kostelov— No; wait. That mightn't be such a good idea; you and the picture and Kostelov alone together. Take it to our apartment. Wait for me there."

"Like a good girl?" I asked bitterly.

"Yeah." Jeff kissed me on the forehead and slammed the door in my face. He gave the driver our Gay Street address, and the cab left him standing there alone on the pavement. I turned around, looked out the back window, and saw that yawning black mouth of a driveway swallow Jeff.

My homeward ride was hardly a happy one. A girl can't be expected to relax and enjoy the scenery while her husband chases an arsenic-dispensing citizen down a dark alley.

I pushed the street door of our building open with my shoulder and walked back through the hall. I unlocked our living-room door and reached unsuccessfully for the light switch. The painters, I discovered, had placed a heavy chest smack in front of it. Blessing them, I opened the hall door wide so that its light would enable me to climb across the furniture-jammed room to a lamp in the far corner.

I dropped the canvas on my first obstacle, a bed table, and began threading my way toward the lamp.

I had to climb halfway over the couch to get to it, and I was about

to snap it on when the rectangle of light behind me suddenly narrowed into nothing. The door into the hall had closed. I heard the click of metal as it settled in its lock. I heard the soft creaking of a floor board.

Foolishly, without thinking, I said, "Who is it?"

There was no answer, of course. There was only a shuffling sound of footsteps groping forward. And I suddenly stopped listening; I had thought of the picture. I lunged toward the bed table.

Something hit me a glancing blow on the forehead. I twisted around and it struck again and then again, on my cheek and on my neck. And that was the place where everything stopped and got even darker and far away . . . very far away. . . .

I opened my eyes, to see a pair of be-trousered legs move toward me. I closed my eyes quickly. If I was going to be permanently put away, I was darned if I would be a spectator to the proceedings.

"Haila!" Jeff said.

I sat up. "Jeff, the picture! On the bed table!"

"It's gone. Haila, are you all right? The hell with the picture!"

He helped me to my feet. I sat on the studio couch and felt my head. No bleeding, but two rising lumps. I turned it to the right, but not to the left.

"Darling, my neck is broken! It's broken!"

"I don't think so," Jeff reassured me. He picked my silver hand mirror off the floor and put it back on the chest of drawers. "But it should be," he said.

"Oh," I groaned. Then immediately I felt much happier. "Jeff, I'm alive!"

He pushed a roll of draperies off the couch, sat down, and put his arm around me. "That's what I like about you, sweetheart. You're alive."

"Jeff, I feel dizzy. Lie me down."

"You are lying down."

He went away, and when he came back something cold landed on my head and felt wonderful. After a moment or two Jeff's face stopped going around in circles, and I was all right. At least, well enough to tell him what had happened.

"It's my fault," he said grimly. "Somehow I managed to walk past our pal in that alleyway. He saw you leave with the picture and sneaked away to follow you. He probably even heard me tell you where to go. While I was looking for him he was on his way here."

Jeff got the mirror and handed it to me. "Here, Haila; go ahead. Hit me with it. I should suffer, too. Go ahead, hard."

"You got banged on the nose, darling."

"The Troys are sure taking it

tonight. Left and right. Move over, Haila. I ought to rest my nose."

Jeff stretched out beside me and I put my head on his shoulder. "Jeff, won't this business tonight eliminate some of the people, though?"

"Who? The murderer wanted to get that picture out of the library and we beat him to it by an eyelash. He saw us leave the Howells' apartment with it in my hand. He followed us. It might have been anyone. And whoever it was will have some swell alibi for tonight."

"I suppose so," I groaned. I sat up. "Jeff, I'm in no condition to stand the smell of this paint. I'm getting sick. Let's go back to the Howells'."

The Troy luck had changed and we were able to get all the way to Roger and Ellen's, all the way into bed, in fact, without either of us suffering any further physical damage. Halfway through a great sigh of relief, I remembered.

"Jeff, the picture. We'll never see it again, will we?"

"I'm afraid not." His voice was tired and discouraged.

"Then the case won't ever be solved, will it? I mean, poor Sara — How can anyone ever prove now that she didn't kill Angela?"

"Go to sleep, sweetheart."

A second later I remembered something else and kicked myself accordingly. "Jeff, if only I'd managed to see who it was before I got hit."

"Yeah," Jeff murmured. "If you had, the killer would have found it necessary to forever still your spiteful little tongue. Know what I mean?"

"Uh-huh," I said. I shuddered and moved even closer to Jeff. . . .

When I awoke that next morning I lay quietly in the big canopied bed for a few minutes just looking around me and liking what I saw. Sunlight was streaming into the room, high-lighting the finish on the antique chests, brightening the already gay colors of the rugs and draperies and chairs.

It seemed then, as I lay there, that this must surely be a room in some serene and pleasant country home. It couldn't be a part of a New York penthouse that only yesterday had had sudden death for a tenant. Everything that had happened must have been only a grisly nightmare chased away by the morning sun.

And then I swallowed, and my throat told me that arsenic, murder, and a twice-stolen portrait of Angela Brady was no bad dream. My larynx felt exactly as any larynx would feel after being swatted with a heavy silver mirror. It felt awful.

I sat up in bed and opened my mouth to greet my spouse lovingly. *Good morning, darling,* was what I had planned to say. The weird, rasping croak that slithered off my

lips caused Jeff to turn and stare at me in amazement.

"What did you say, Haila?" he asked.

I tried again, with the same result.

"Haila, are you imitating an indignant bagpipe on purpose?"

I shook my head and pointed to my throat.

"Oh," Jeff said. "As of last night. Does it hurt?"

I measured off an inch with two fingers.

"Just a little, huh? Want a doctor?"

I shook my head.

"You're all right? You just can't talk?"

I nodded yes.

Jeff considered for a moment. Then his face broke into a gleeful grin that grew more obnoxious by the second. "Haila," he said, "you have never heard my high-school commencement speech all the way through. I will now . . ."

I leaped out of bed and escaped to the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later the entire Troy family was spick, span, and ready for some breakfast. On the stairs Jeff suggested that it might be better if we pretended my trouble was all laryngitis and no looking glass.

A clock striking twelve marked time for our march through the library and living-room out onto the terrace. Apparently murder had temporarily disrupted both the writing and publishing of books, for at a table gay with red-and-white-striped linen and plaid-painted dishes, Roger and Zack Jacoby were hunched over the morning papers.

But only Zack was reading. Roger's mind was obviously far from the printed page before him and his tired, troubled eyes gave proof that he had had little, if any, sleep.

It was Zack who greeted us. "Good morning and how are you?" he said, with a forced breeziness.

"Me, I'm fine," Jeff answered. "Haila, you may be pleased to know, can't talk. A pernicious case of acute laryngitis."

I finally quieted their concern by a series of gestures conveying, roughly, that it was nothing serious.

"Where's Ellen?" Jeff asked.

Roger moved uneasily in his chair. "She hasn't come down yet," he said. "Dreshar was here this morning and spent a whole hour with her. He probably third-degreed her back to sleep." He rose and moved restlessly across the terrace. "I wish she'd come down, I . . ." He stopped.

A maid in a crisp, bright uniform brought us breakfast, and for a while Zack and Jeff worked at conversation. But Roger had sunk into a brooding silence that finally overwhelmed them, and the four of us just sat. At last Jeff an-

nounced that he and I were going to the studio to explain his absence from work to the boss.

VIII

ANOTHER DAY OF the Village Art Show had filled the streets around Washington Square with a fresh surge of pictures and people. But today Jeff seem unmindful of art. And, as he ran interference for me, he hardly seemed to notice the people. He was preoccupied; I was curious. We certainly weren't headed for Jeff's place of business.

Fortunately, my breakfast had stood me in good stead, and I was able to work my voice all the way up to a whisper.

"Darling," I croaked, "where are we going?"

"Back to see Douglas Murray."

"Why?"

"Well, the picture's gone for good now. And if Murray can't be made to tell its secret, this murder will never be solved. He's our last hope."

"Then he's got to tell about it."

"He will, sweetheart," Jeff said cheerfully, "if I have to pound his curly head upon the floor. My nose cries for vengeance."

Perkins Alley was dozing away this Thursday morning in a peaceful quietness. We were about to cross the narrow street to Murray's house when a voice behind us said, "Hey, Mr. Troy!"

A tall man in a dark suit was standing inside a doorway. I recognized him as one of Dreshar's men whom I had seen milling about at the Howells' apartment. Jeff and I walked toward him.

"Got a cigarette?" he asked. "I'm fresh out, and I can't leave here to—"

"Sure," Jeff said. "Here, keep the pack. Is Murray in?"

"That guy hasn't stuck his face outside his door since we started watching him right after the murder. To my mind he's a suspicious character."

"Has he had any callers?"

"Just you two last night."

Jeff jumped. "You were here last night?"

The man shifted uneasily. "Well, to tell the truth, no. I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention it to Dreshar, but when I seen you and your wife arrive, I figured it would be a safe time for me to get a bite to eat."

"Oh," Jeff said, his voice dripping with disappointment.

"I got back just as you were leaving. So Murray was always covered. . . . Why? Did something happen while I was gone?"

"Nothing much. So we were Murray's only visitors?"

"Just you and that little Daniels girl," the detective said.

"Sara Daniels? She was here?"

"Yeah. She's cute, ain't she? Matter of fact, she only left a few

minutes ago. Funny you didn't run into her."

"We'll be seeing her," Jeff promised. "Thanks."

"Thanks for the cigarettes."

We crossed the street to No. 18 Perkins Alley. I paused on the stoop to straighten a wayward stocking while Jeff went into the vestibule and punched Murray's bell. There was no answer; Douglas was running true to last night's form.

I stood on tiptoe and peered through the window into his room. I could see the back of an easy chair, and Douglas Murray sat in that chair. The top of his black, curly head was visible, and one shoulder and one arm. The arm hung down toward the floor, the hand was twisted strangely.

"Jeff," I whispered.

He was beside me, looking into the window. Then he was diving through the vestibule and the unlocked hall door. I watched him throw his shoulder against the one inside. It shivered the first time. The second time it bounced open. We stood in Douglas Murray's apartment.

I had known; it wasn't necessary for me to look at the figure in the chair before the fireplace. Death had written its story on the face of Douglas Murray as it had on the girl whose portrait he had painted.

Jeff's hands were on my shoulders; he had turned me away from the grotesquely lolling figure in the easy chair and was leading me out into the hallway.

I sat on the carpeted steps there and waited. From the apartment came the whirl of a telephone dial and Jeff's voice reporting a murder at 18 Perkins Alley.

Outside, the sun was shining with beautiful unconcern. A black limousine rolled slowly by. Across the street the plain-clothes man took a last drag on Jeff's cigarette and aimed it at a fireplug. He missed, and his lips humorously formed a word I couldn't hear.

But the words he had spoken a few minutes before were pounding in my ears. *The little Daniels girl . . . she's cute, ain't she? . . . She just left a few minutes ago . . . she just left . . .*

A patrol car slid to a sudden stop before the door. It was the vanguard of the same grim parade that attended Angela Brady less than twenty-four hours before; New York's Homicide Squad was taking over again. The facts of Douglas Murray's death were being scientifically recorded.

I was still sitting on the stairs when Jeff and Detective Lieutenant Dreshar emerged from the living-room and stopped before me. "Same poison," Jeff was saying; "same murderer."

"And the same old story," Dreshar said. He wiped his ruddy face with a large handkerchief. "Murray knew too much. The

killer—not to mention any names—had to get rid of him."

"Not to mention any names," Jeff repeated. "You mean—"

"She was the only person here besides you and your wife. She was the only person who had the opportunity." Jeff didn't answer, and the detective looked at him curiously. "Troy," he said, "it had to be Sara Daniels."

"She poisoned Angela Brady yesterday," Jeff said, more to himself than to Dreshar, "then killed Murray this morning because he knew too much."

"Exactly," Dreshar snapped.

"And the motive?" Jeff asked.

Dreshar smiled. "We'll find that. I've never made a false arrest in my life. That's because I take my time, I get all the facts. And I'll get them now, I've got a break here. Nobody but the murderer knows that Murray is dead. So nobody but the murderer is going to tell a lot of lies like were told yesterday after Angela Brady's death. That'll simplify things.

He included me in his next statement: "So we won't let anybody know about this business for a while; understand?"

He waited for our nods of understanding and then, mumbling that he would be seeing us, hurried back into the apartment.

Jeff held out his hand to me and we walked out of the house, down Perkins Alley to Sixth Avenue, where he stopped and helped me into a parked cab. He gave the driver Sara's address and asked him to hurry.

As we sailed across Fourteenth Street I tried to speak, and the words stuck in my sore throat. I reverted again to whispering: "Jeff, could someone else—anyone else—have been at Murray's besides Sara?"

He shook his head. "Just Sara and you and I. That's an established fact. The place was watched from before the murderer left Dreshar's conference yesterday until now. Furthermore, no packages or letters went into the house."

"But that person last night. He might have—"

"Nothing came through Murray's door then. I can swear to that."

"But that means Dreshar's right, that nobody but Sara could have—"

"It looks that way. I can't seem to make it look any other way. But—"

"But what?"

"There's something, Haila. I almost had it when I was talking to Dreshar."

Jeff's voice faded far away and his eyes followed it as he stared through the window. I watched him all the way up to Seventy-fourth Street, holding my breath, hoping for Sara while I tried to down the growing conviction inside me that she was a murderess.

As the cab slowed to a halt, Jeff rubbed his hand across his forehead. "I can't seem to make it look any other way," he said again.

Suddenly, I didn't want to see Sara Daniels. I didn't want to have her open the door, to hear her greeting, to watch her and spy upon her as she talked. But there I was, and Sara Daniels was opening the door.

Her voice was tired and discouraged. Her face was filled with worry, but that was all. I almost laughed in my relief. If Sara knew that Douglas Murray lay dead before his fireplace there would have been more. She couldn't have been the agent of his death and still look and talk as she did now.

Jeff was saying, "Sara, you haven't been in all day, have you?"

She glanced down at the white chenille bathrobe she was wearing and smiled faintly. I waited tensely for her answer. If Sara had a lie ready, if she had a made-to-order alibi—

"No, I've been out," she said. "I went down to see Douglas Murray."

"Why, Sara?"

She sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair and tucked her feet up on its rung. She looked small and very lonely. "I thought he might be able to help me, that he might know something about Angela's death. But he couldn't help —or wouldn't. I don't know."

"How was he?"

Puzzled, Sara repeated, "How was he? As far as I could see, he was his usual charmingly rude self. Why? Why do you—?"

The ringing of the telephone cut her short. Jeff said, "Shall I get it?"

Sara shook her head as she walked to the break-front bookcase. She picked up the phone, and as she listened and spoke mechanically into it, her face was flooded with a near panic.

She shook her head in denial or refusal as she said, "I understand, but . . . yes." She dropped the phone back into its cradle and turned away from us. "No," she muttered, "no, I can't."

"What is it, Sara?"

"That was Dreshar. He's having everyone go up to Roger's—immediately. There's to be another conference, another horror like yesterday."

"Why does it frighten you, Sara?"

She twisted around to us and her fists were clenched. "Don't you see? It isn't the murder, not just the murder! It's what happened last night—Roger and Ellen and I. I can't go to their house again; I can't face them now."

Jeff said gently, "Sara, you'll have to go. If you don't—well, Dreshar will misunderstand. It's important, Sara, that you don't

appear to be running away."

After a long time Sara said in a dull voice, "All right, Jeff; I'll go. You're right."

"Would you like us to wait for you?"

"No, I think I'd rather you wouldn't. I don't know why. I guess I can't bear having any moral support."

We were in a cab again, headed now for the Howell apartment and a conference called by Dreshar to add the finishing touches to his case against Sara.

"Sara killed Angela Brady yesterday," Jeff said slowly. "Then this morning she poisoned Douglas Murray because he knew too much, because he knew the secret of the picture . . ."

His voice trailed off and disappeared into something that sounded like a discouraged curse. Our cab moved swiftly down Fifth Avenue toward the Howells' and Dreshar.

We were crossing Fifty-ninth Street when Jeff spoke again: "But if Sara isn't guilty . . . if she didn't murder them . . ."

Jeff struck a match, lifted it to his cigarette. Through a haze of smoke, he said, "Or Douglas Murray was poisoned. Then the murderer met Angela Brady at the Howells' party, discovered that she knew too much, and killed her there."

Poor Jeff, I thought; ***his brain has gone into reverse.***

"Jeff," I croaked, "Angela was killed first. Then Murray."

"No!" His voice leaped with excitement. "Haila, if Sara didn't kill Murray this morning, who did?"

"Why—nobody did. Nobody could have. She's the only one who had the opportunity."

"Right. Therefore, if Sara is innocent, Murray had to be poisoned *before* Angela."

"But Angela died first. She . . ."

"She died first, but maybe she wasn't poisoned first. Maybe Murray's poison was planted—two days ago, a week ago, in something like toothpaste or medicine or anything that he used regularly. Long-distance murder. That would mean that his murder was the premeditated killing and that Angela was killed because she could have solved his murder when it happened."

"Yes, Jeff, but—" I took a deep breath to cool my burning throat.

"But what?"

"Well, even if you're right, that doesn't clear Sara. She could have planted Murray's poison a week ago."

Jeff shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. The murderer could never be sure exactly when Murray would die. He wouldn't go near Perkins Alley until after it had happened. He'd stay away, far away. He'd have a cast-iron alibi. But Sara went to Murray's this morning. For my

money that would clear her."

"But it's only a theory, Jeff; you don't have anything."

"Yeah, it's only a theory. But, if I'm right, Sara is innocent. And if I'm wrong—"

IX

THEY WERE ALL in the library when we got there—Zack and Roger and Ellen, Mrs. Tollman and Kostelov; all tense with expectancy, all blank-faced with trying not to betray it. Only Sara and Detective Dreshar hadn't arrived. Mrs. Tollman rose to her feet as we entered.

"Young man," she blared at Jeff, "I said that I would attend this ridiculous meeting and I am here. I did not say, however, how long I would remain. Where is that man Dreshar?"

"I don't know," Jeff said. "I don't know anything about this meeting."

"I hardly believe that. You are obviously working with the police."

"Relax, baby," Zack Jacoby said, grinning maliciously.

Roger forced his haggard, tired face into a smile. "Zack's right, Mrs. Tollman. Relax. You can't leave, you know. You'd be thrown in the clink in you did that."

"Thrown in the clink?"

"Put behind bars," Ellen said brightly. "Detained by the constabulary. Imprisoned. Like for smoking in the subway." She raised her hands and pressed her finger tips against her temples.

Her voice had a new intensity when she spoke again: "I hope to God this meeting will be the end of it . . ." Her words dropped away, but I had caught in them another glimpse of the Ellen I had seen last night. It was gone immediately. "Would anyone like a drink? Mr. Kostelov?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Howell. I never drink while I am on duty as a murder suspect."

Out in the foyer the elevator door slid open and shut, and their sound was as loud as thunder. Sara walked into the room. She was calm, but she walked a little too jauntily.

Ellen said, "Hello, darling!"

"Hello, Ellen. Hello, everyone."

Roger said, "How are you, Sara?"

"I'm fine, but I'm afraid I'm nervous."

"We are all nervous, very nervous," Kostelov said.

"I'm not nervous," Mrs. Tollman said. "Why should I be?"

Zack grinned and started to say something, and then changed his mind. Sara moved over to the fireplace. The wide column of slate-gray stones reaching to the ceiling dwarfed her as she stood there, making her look like a small, frightened child. She leaned her head back, letting it rest on the edge of the mantelpiece.

"We're waiting for Dreshar, Sara," Roger said.

"Yes, I know we are."

"Sara!" Jeff said. His voice was low but there was an urgency in it that made us all turn to stare at him. "Sara, did you tell me once that you and Angela used to wear each other's clothes?"

Little puzzled lines knotted Sara's forehead, and Zack Jacoby laughed. "Let's trade secrets," he said.

Jeff's eyes were still on Sara. "Tell me. You wore each other's clothes?"

Sara was frowning when she answered. "Yes. Well, not exactly. Angela seldom borrowed anything of mine; I never had much that was terrific. But I've always borrowed her things. They fitted me perfectly and she had such beautiful stuff . . . Why, Jeff?"

Jeff was on his feet and moving quickly out of the room toward the foyer and the elevator. "I'll be back," he said, his words bristling with a mixture of triumph and exultation. "I'll be back."

And he was gone.

There was a moment's hush, then a minor uproar. Everyone was talking at once, wondering, guessing, speculating. Somebody needed a drink, and then we were out on the terrace, sipping Martinis amid a cloud of conjecture.

Jeff's flash had ignited Roger even more than the others. He was pacing the terrace, smoking a chain of cigarettes, talking more than I had ever heard him talk before.

"That portrait of Angela," he was saying now. "I'm positive the answer's there. Haila, just you and Jeff saw it. Can't you remember? Tell us."

"I only saw it once." I couldn't tell him that I had seen it a second time only last night. "But even then I noticed—"

"Speak up, child!" Mrs. Tollman said.

"Haila has laryngitis," Roger explained.

"There was something strange about it," I said. "Something unnatural, out of proportion. I remember when Jeff put it down in the library the darkness of the room accentuated that unnaturalness."

The sound Ellen made was a cross between a gasp and a little cry. She was standing at the parapet, her hands gripping the railing on each side of her. "Haila, exactly where in the library did Jeff put the picture?"

"By the fireplace, Ellen."

"On that side of the room," she said; "you're sure?"

"I'm certain."

Ellen opened her mouth and then clamped it shut on unspoken words.

Zack Jacoby was at her side. "Ellen, what is it?"

She said, "Nothing." And turned away.

"You saw something, Ellen," Roger said.

She shook her head emphatically. "No. It doesn't matter. It's of no importance."

Kostelov said, "Mrs. Howell, there is nothing of no importance when murder has been done, is there?"

"I saw nothing at all!" Her voice was choked and muffled. "Let me alone."

"Haila," Zack Jacoby said, "what else about the picture?"

But I didn't want to go on, to describe that portrait. I wanted to take Ellen by her shoulders and shake the truth out of her. To force out of her what she knew and was holding back. But I couldn't.

I was surrounded suddenly by a ring of eyes, watching me, waiting for me to speak. They seemed to have united somehow, to have swarmed together with one purpose: to burn their way into my mind and read for themselves the words before I could speak them. There was something frighteningly hypnotic about those eyes that sent a chill sweeping up my spine.

I looked across the terrace to Ellen, and as I did she left the parapet and, with a queer, jerking step, moved to a small table and picked up her cocktail. Her face was blank as she went back to stand where she had been before.

"The picture, Haila, the picture," Zack was saying with a deadly insistence.

"Yes . . . Angela was standing before a fireplace. She was wearing a plain, dark dress and a big cabbage rose." They crowded even closer to me to hear my voice, which now was no sound at all but a faint whisper. "A big cabbage rose, and there was a gold bracelet, thick and wide . . ."

The spasmodic jerk of Ellen's hands stopped me. Her arms were resting on the rail, and her hands, interlocked around her cocktail glass, were suspended in mid-air. I saw them as they tighetned convulsively, and the fragile stem of the glass snapped in two and the pieces fell to the street below.

Ellen turned slowly, her eyes wide, her lips parted as if to scream. But she didn't scream. Her voice was dead quiet and expressionless. "My cocktail," she said, "was poisoned."

Roger lurched toward the door. "I'll get a doctor!"

She stopped him. "No. I'm all right. I didn't swallow any."

"You're positive?" Roger demanded.

"Yes. I—I want to go upstairs."

Roger was on one side of her, Zack on the other, offering to help her. Without speaking, she withdrew from them and extended a hand toward me. I went quickly to her.

"Haila," she said quietly, "Haila will go with me."

She moved like a robot, with her head held stiffly erect until I had closed the bedroom door behind us and she had said, "Lock it, Haila."

Then her last ounce of poise and strength deserted her, and she collapsed on the huge, white bed. I threw a soft coverlet over her and switched on a lamp.

"Ellen," I said, forcing my voice into a sound loud enough to be heard. "Ellen, you must tell me. What is it that you know?"

Ellen was very pale.

She brushed her hand across her forehead. "Not now," she said, "It was nothing."

"It was something so important that you had to be killed! You can't keep quiet! He may try again."

Ellen closed her eyes and turned away from me. "Not now . . . just stay with me, Haila."

I got up then and pushed open the French doors that led to the balcony. It was dark now, and little friendly squares of dim light were popping out of the shadowy apartment houses around us.

And just below Ellen's room was a murderer. Walking on the terrace, sipping, perhaps, at his cocktail, talking with the others. Letting a note of horror creep into his voice as he spoke of Ellen's poisoned cocktail. Looking with suspicion at the others. Knowing all the while that Ellen knew him for what he was. And smiling to himself, knowing that she wouldn't tell.

Ellen turned restively on her bed and I went to her. The fluffy silk coverlet had slipped to the floor. I picked it up and started to lay it over her again, when I stopped. The long sleeve of her house coat had crept up her arm, her right arm. Around the wrist, in startling contrast to the deep tan, was a band of whiteness. A wide circle of whiteness, as if, through all the summer months, a bracelet had shielded that patch of skin from the burning sun.

I dropped the cover, and with my heart pounding so furiously it seemed that its clamor must be heard by Ellen, I moved to her dressing table. I opened one drawer, then another. I found a jewel case and raised its lid. Earrings and pins and necklaces.

I slid my fingers down its side and removed the top shelf. In the compartment beneath it lay a single object. A bracelet, thick and wide and heavily carved. A bracelet that I had seen before on another arm. . . . No, not on another arm.

For in that second I knew the answer, the truth. I knew why the portrait of Angela Brady had disturbed me when I first saw it, why I had been oppressed by its strange unnaturalness. I knew why it had been slashed from its frame and hidden, why I had been followed and attacked for its recovery.

For that work of art had been a composite picture. The head, with its flaming mass of red-gold hair, was Angela's. But the rest of it . . . that was Ellen Howell.

A few words that I had heard and quickly forgotten came back to tantalize me now. What was it Angela Brady had said? I could hear Mrs. Tollman's strident voice as she repeated it. Words that the dead Angela had said to her hostess: *"You must get tired, Mrs. Howell, of having my head on your shoulders."* And Ellen's explanation . . . an art gallery opening . . . Angela with a crying jag . . .

All lies. All quick, brilliant lies rolling glibly off Ellen's tongue. Angela Brady had been talking about no taxi ride. No taxi ride had ever happened. It was Angela's *painted* head on Ellen's *painted* shoulders.

I raised my eyes, and in the mirror above the dressing table they met Ellen's. She was sitting upright in her bed; she was smiling.

"So you know," she said softly. "You know."

I spun around. "Ellen . . ."

The smile grew broader. "Don't bother. You've seen it, haven't you? You've put it all together. You know the answers now, don't you, Haila?"

Suddenly, shockingly, I was frightened. Afraid of a woman in her bed, still weak and dazed by what she had been through. It was nonsense, it was . . .

And I stopped, frozen into numbness by my knowledge. There had been no poison in Ellen's cocktail. The glass falling to the street, where the contents would be lost. Conveniently falling as I had been about to describe a bracelet. I had to struggle to move my legs, to force them to step toward the door.

She was there first. With her back flat against the door she snatched the key from its lock and dropped it in her pocket. She was laughing at me—silent, horrible, mirthless laughter.

"You know, don't you, Haila? That I killed Angela. I killed Murray, too. I killed him last week. Some morning soon when he takes one certain vitamin tablet, he'll die. I had to kill him, Haila; he wouldn't let me go. He wanted me to give up all this for him, he was going to make me do it."

She paused, and her smile was twisted and bitter. "I hadn't counted on that. I thought when I was through with Douglas Murray I would tell him so, and it would be over. I hadn't counted on him falling so desperately in love with me. He wouldn't let me end it. I couldn't handle him any longer; I tried and it was no good. He threatened to tell Roger about us. And Roger—he's in love with Sara, you know. He'd believe it;

he'd be glad to believe it. He doesn't love me, but he's loyal.

"He'll stay with me forever . . . forever, as long as he never knows the truth. And Murray would have told him. Then I wouldn't be Mrs. Roger Howell. I like being her, Haila. I won't give it up for anything. I'd kill anyone who tried to make me give it up. Don't forget Haila—I've killed twice. It comes easy now."

I turned away, horrified by Ellen's slow, mad rambling. There had to be some way out of that room, some way through which I could escape. I looked frantically around me. There was nothing. Nothing except that locked door to which Ellen held the key.

I lunged toward her pocket, and her hands closed over mine. They tightened like iron bands around my wrists and she forced me backward, back deeper into the room. I wrenched my hands away from her. I opened my mouth and screamed. And she laughed aloud, suddenly, at the hoarse, soundless rasp that crossed my lips.

"Louder, Haila," she taunted. "Scream louder. They can't hear that. They can't help you if you don't scream louder."

I pounded my heels down onto the floor, and the thick, deep-napped carpet rendered the blows noiseless. I backed away from her slowly as she edged closer to me. Her eyes caught mine and held them with a glassy, mesmerizing stare.

"I'll tell you how I did it, Haila. It doesn't matter now. It was easy to kill Murray; there was no risk. No one in the world knew about us, no one was aware that I even knew him. I'd been so careful. His death would never be traced to me, except for one small thing. One foolish thing. I had let him paint me once, and that portrait would connect us. I told him I didn't like it, I asked him to destroy it. He didn't want to; he thought it was the finest painting he'd ever done. But at last I made him promise to destroy it. I thought he had."

Ellen stopped. Her tongue moved across her upper lip. She was coming toward me again, slowly, glidingly, like a sleepwalker. I knew then that I would have to let her go on; I must listen to her insane boasting until it ended.

"And then yesterday," she was saying softly, "that girl came here. She told me that she had posed for Douglas Murray, posed for him while he painted her head on my portrait. She recognized me from newspaper pictures she had seen. She went to Sara, she made Sara bring her here so that she could talk to me, to threaten me. She knew that it was I who had come between her and Murray. And unless I gave him up, she said, she'd tell my husband; she'd use the portrait as proof."

The back of my legs hit against the dressing table bench, and I stumbled.

Ellen smiled faintly, and her words, still staccato and compelling, stabbed through the smile: "I was half crazy from Angela's threat when I saw the picture you had brought there in the library. It was like a ghost come back to shriek my secret at everyone. I was a fool to have ever believed Murray, to think that any artist could bring himself to destroy the finest thing he'd ever done. And that hybrid thing was his compromise.

He sold it, I suppose, to keep me from knowing what he'd done to it. And he thought he had disguised it so that no one would realize that I had been the model. But Roger would have known—known the moment he saw it—the dress, the bracelet—he'd know. The picture had to be destroyed. I tore it from its frame. And then I was trapped—people all around me, in the living-room and in the foyer. I couldn't get out of the library with it, there was no time to destroy it there. I rolled it up in the window shade.

"But there was still the girl. Oh, I could keep her quiet for a while. But I couldn't keep Murray quiet; he still had to die. And when he did, what then? She'd be there, knowing that I had killed him, knowing why. I had to kill her, kill her at once, before anything happened to Murray. I was mad with fear and there was so much to do. There was the poison, the same poison I had used for him. I put it in her cocktail. I had to remember my bracelet and hide it while you and Jeff were here. I had to keep the white mark on my wrist covered—long sleeves—jackets . . ."

My heels struck the threshold of the balcony, backed two steps more through the French doors. I turned to the right, then to the left. There was no escape through another room. The balcony served only Ellen's bedroom.

She was smiling again, a little triumphant smile. And then I knew why she had been talking, why she had been telling me her story of murder. She had forced me backward with it, close to the balcony's edge. The horror of her words had driven me there as surely as if they had been pounding clubs.

Behind me I could feel the black abyss, its bottom Fifth Avenue, its bottom seventeen stories below. I could hear a radio playing softly somewhere beneath me. I could hear the sound of voices: Sara's voice and then Roger's and Zack's.

I opened my mouth and again that futile, whispering breath. And once more that horrible, mirthless laughter which was Ellen's.

"You will have fallen, Haila," she said. "You will have come out

here and fallen. I won't even know about it, you see. I'll be asleep from a dose of veronal. The box will be on the table beside my bed the glass . . ."

There were footsteps in the hall outside, there was a knocking at the door. I tried to call. I tried to move, to run to the door, and I was paralyzed. The parapet was behind me, my hands touched its iron rail. Jeff's voice was calling.

"Ellen!"

She didn't turn. Her eyes still laughed into mine, her face was distorted. But the words she spoke came out calmly, with a terrible serenity: "I'm all right, Jeff, I'm going to sleep."

She moved toward me again, her arms outstretched. I lunged to one side, and she blocked my path. Her hands grasped my shoulders like steel claws. I struggled wildly, trying to twist out of her grip, and she forced me back. The railing of the parapet dug into the small of my back.

But the pounding at the door hadn't stopped. It turned into a ramming and the jambs squealed. The whole door seemed to explode as Jeff and Detective Lieutenant Dreshar burst into the room.

X

AN HOUR LATER Jeff and I were at home. It was dirty, the air was still laden with the smell of paint, the furniture had been only approximately put back in its position. The place was a mess, and it was wonderful to be there again.

Those sixty minutes had been filled with furious activity. Dreshar taking charge—Jeff leading me out of the room—a flying pencil shorthanding Ellen's hysterical confession—Roger, his face a horrified, incredulous blank, as he moved blindly toward Sara—and Dreshar again, clapping Jeff on the back and shaking his hand.

Jeff sat down beside me, the better to hear what had once been my voice. "Did I thank you for saving my life?"

"No."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

"How did it happen? Wonderful coincidences like that don't happen to me. I usually get killed."

"What do you mean, coincidence? I found Dreshar at Murray's and dragged him back to arrest Ellen Howell. We would have been there sooner but Dreshar was hard to convince."

"You knew it was Ellen? I don't believe you. How?"

"I knew when I saw Sara standing before the fireplace. She looked so little there. And then she said that she had worn Angela's clothes, that they fitted her perfectly. So, if Angela was Sara's size, she couldn't have posed for that picture. She could never have draped an arm over that high mantel in Douglas Murray's room. If we'd ever seen

Angela alive, standing up, we'd have known. We should have guessed it, anyway. Everybody talked about little Angela, about that poor child. We should have known that the woman in the portrait was a tall woman and that Angela was short."

"So then," I said, "you got it. A composite picture."

"Right. The picture had to be of Ellen; she was the only female suspect tall enough to have posed for it. That was the picture's secret. And she had to destroy it because, except for the head, it was a picture of herself. And when I knew that, I was sure of my theory. Murray was the initial victim, Angela the cover-up."

"That portrait! It was Angela's undoing."

"Yes. If she hadn't seen it, hadn't posed for the repainting, she would never have found out about Ellen and Murray. She wouldn't have gone to Ellen to beg her to give him up. And she'd be alive. Nobody would have found out about them, because Ellen had already quieted Murray by promising to leave Roger and go to him. That's what made Doug such a nice, quiet, docile lad while he was catching up to that vitamin tablet. Willy-nilly, Doug was a dead pigeon, but the portrait did for Angela and, finally, uncovered Ellen."

"And it didn't do me any good," I said. "Ellen nearly massacred me to get it back last night."

Jeff nodded. "That picture had become an obsession with her. Untill it was destroyed—completely and for all time—she was in danger. It wasn't safe in the window shade. Sooner or later someone would pull it down and . . . *bing!* She tried all evening, she said, to get it, but the coast was never clear. And finally, when Zack and Roger left the library to go to bed, then you and I beat her there. She saw us leave the apartment with the picture. She rode down in the service elevator—it's self-operating, and nobody noticed her. Then she followed our cab.

"And at the warehouse she saw you leave with the picture, slipped away from me, and followed you. She'd heard us talking and knew you were headed for home. It was a risk, but by that time she was desperate. And she got the canvas away from you without being seen, and this time she destroyed it for good—in the incinerator in her apartment house."

"Jeff, it was Ellen at Murray's during the time all the lights in the apartment went out, wasn't it?"

"Yes. As soon as the police left her apartment after the murder, Ellen called Murray and told him what had happened. She told him that if the police learned of their relationship they might think that she had killed Angela out of jealousy. So Murray, never suspecting Ellen, promised to keep quiet about everything, including the pic-

ture. But Ellen couldn't sit tight. Murderers never can. She had to make sure of Murray. She phoned him again and said she'd come to see him quite late so no one would see her. We stymied her, of course, but she got back home without being seen.

"But she needn't have bothered at all. Murray wouldn't have talked. He thought he was protecting an innocent woman. He was keeping the woman he loved from being dragged through a nasty murder case. And all the while that arsenic-flavored vitamin tablet, a present from Ellen, was waiting for him. Charming girl, Ellen; very talented."

Ellen, the murderess. I still could hardly believe it. For in those few times when I had caught her off guard I had seen another woman, a soft, gentle, deeply human woman. Now I knew I had been wrong. Those were the moments when she had been acting to impress Roger and Sara, and to deceive the rest of us.

The hard and brittle Ellen was the real one. A woman who would murder to hold her wealth and her position and her name. To hold Roger, whom she didn't love and who no longer loved her. That was the lady I had been so plaesed to meet. Well, after this, I would be more careful whom I was pleased to meet.

Jeff slipped his arm around my shoulders. "I'm a great admirer of yours, Haila," he said; "a great admirer." He pulled me closer to him and turned my face to his.

"I'll scream," I warned.

Jeff smiled knowingly.

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•

A FATHER'S DUTY

by CURTIS W. CASEWIT

THE ELDERLY MAN picked his way across the pebbles of the parking lot. At the gate, he took his hat off. He had distinguished white hair and a high even forehead, with two sharp lines descending to his brows. He had a severe solemn face; you might have thought him an attorney.

"I'm Mr. Lambrecht," he told the guard. His voice held firmness, pride, as though his name had never been disgraced. "I came to fetch my son."

"You from the old country?"

"I was born there," Lambrecht admitted, in an almost apologetic tone: "My son is Karl Lambrecht. He will come out presently?"

"Guess so. At noon."

"Would you please tell him that I am in the automobile?"

The guard nodded.

"Thank you, very much," Lam-

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brecht said with effort. When he turned, humiliation bore down on him. His clean, old car seemed miles away, and when he reached it his feet felt numb. He took a deep breath and opened the glove compartment. He always kept a revolver there.

He put the weapon into his right topcoat pocket. His hands trembled. Strange, he thought. For three years he had anticipated this moment. Now that it had come, and they were about to drive along the lonely, wintry road, just the two of them, excitement made his heart beat faster and filmed his brow with moisture.

He peered outside the car. The November sun tried to shine through the leafless trees, slanting across the towers. He couldn't understand why Karl was keeping him waiting. In which building was he? What trouble is he in now, Lambrecht wondered apprehensively.

Karl had caused nothing but trouble. Car thefts, to start with, then purse-snatching and shoplifting. Teenage gangs, reform school for picking pockets. But the worst was the store burglary. Lambrecht lived the horror over again now, in his mind, shame stabbing at him. The embarrassment, the publicity, the plainclothesmen interrogating him in his Milwaukee office. How often had Karl been thrashed? How often had Karl run away from home? Was his mother severe? When had they last heard from Karl?

Lambrecht hadn't heard from him for years. The dream of a son he could be proud of, even the well-intentioned whippings were almost forgotten by now. Lambrecht hadn't attended the trial—his wife had been too ill at the time. The affair had increased the severity of a heart ailment that had almost killed her. She hadn't come along today, but she, too, was European and she agreed with his code: Disgrace, dishonor must be erased. They were Lambrechts, respectable people, with an obligation to the community which could not be shirked.

His finger slid over the gun barrel now, touching the trigger-guard, the safety catch. It might not be so difficult after all. But he must preserve his dignity. He must be calm. No anger. Contempt, yes—but not anger.

A lock clanged open. "Your Dad is waiting," said the guard's voice.

A hinge creaked, and there was Karl, sucked up by the shadows of the wall, so that Lambrecht could not see the youth's face. He only saw the tall frame and the coarse, prison-made suit come crunching toward the car. Karl had picked out a black shirt, and a blue sports coat with green and red stripes. His son's hair was darker than when Lambrecht had last seen it and it was freshly cut.

The prison barber had left sideburns.

"I don't want to talk to you," Karl said through the open window. "Can't you leave me alone?"

"Come in for one minute," Lambrecht said severely. "I wish to speak with you."

"You're not going to push me around. Not any more. I'm grown up."

Lambrecht thought: What an atrocious voice he has now. The gruff, withdrawn quality rang in his ears as he bent across the seat and opened the door. He jerked the suitcase out of his son's hand, and put it down between them. "Sit down, Karl!"

Karl slid into the seat reluctantly. You could feel the rebellion in him—a past littered with bitterness, with resentment against authority. "What d'you want?"

"Look at me!" Lambrecht said, staring into the youth's sullen, furtive eyes. My God, he thought. How ugly he has become. A wave of pity washed over him at the change: the grey-green skin, the bony nose, the cobweb lines about the mouth. Guilt began to stir in him. He has had his punishment, Lambrecht thought. You must make him get over the three years —the damp walls, the airless corridors. You have to help him, not harm him.

For a moment, Lambrecht was afraid he was going to cry. He had never cried before in his life.

"You through gaping at me?" the boy demanded.

"I am sorry," the older man said. But Karl's voice scraped at his nerves, and he remembered his correspondence with the parole officer. "Karl's marks were good, and we are releasing him," the letter had read. "Yet we are not positive about Karl's rehabilitation. He can only be reformed if there is parental interest and sympathy, and a secure home—"

Of course, Lambrecht told himself. I will give him more time. Be less severe. Show more warmth, more emotion. He was gripped by a vision of Karl's fuure. "Listen to me, Karl."

His son's cold blue eyes shot him a morose glance. "I can grab a train—"

"No, no," Lambrecht said rapidly, hope tearing at him. "Listen carefully. I know you do not wish to be a brewer like myself. You told me so often enough. But if you come with me to Milwaukee so I can—"

"So you can whip the hell out of me."

"No, Karl. So that I can help you make a fresh start. No one knows you in Milwaukee. There is a grocer in my neighborhood. He also arrived from Europe when he was young. I am sure he can employ you. You once worked as a food checker, did you not? And in the vegetable department? You can do so again. I could ask the

parole board. I bet you will make at least twelve dollars a day—"

"That's peanuts."

"Just to start with, Karl."

"Hell, I won't break my back for a lousy—"

"Do you know I worked for fifty cents a day? It is merely at first. You can advance, Karl. You are only twenty-three now."

The bony hands gestured toward the granite walls. "Me peddling bananas? After three years in that joint I just came out of?"

Lambrecht shuddered. Sweat prickled under his dark hat, under the white shirt, the buttoned overcoat. "Explain, please?"

"The truth will give you a jolt."

"Let's hear it."

Karl leaned over confidentially, his face like a skull's. Presently, his neck tilted toward the prison towers. "Reform school was for kids. In there, one picks up real things."

"Ja?"

"I latched on to the ropes. Learned more than shoplifting. More than burglaries. I learned about rods."

"Rods?"

"Guns. How to hold up a bank. How to stick up a payroll clerk. Or to crack an armored car." The blue eyes lit up; they were no longer sullen. "It just takes contacts if you want to hit the big money. And I met the right people—"

"Criminals are right?"

"Not your way. But they suit me fine. I figure we got a profession just like yours. And now don't sermon—"

"No, I will not sermon," Lambrecht said with awe. He thrust one hand into his topcoat pocket. His other hand reached across the suitcase, across his son, to the door. He opened it. "Get out from the automobile!"

"In a minute," Karl said. His elbow slammed open the glove compartment.

"The gun is not there," Lambrecht said. "I have it in my pocket. I do not wish to make my seat-covers dirty with your blood."

The leaden sensation was over. Lambrecht felt a lightness now, an almost hysterical recklessness. He noticed that in his excitement, he could hardly speak English.

"Heraus!" he cried. "Outside! *Verstehst Du?"* His strong clean hands—hands that had toiled a lifetime—struck at the sideburns.

Karl ran. But Lambrecht rushed after him, and the pistol butt smashed against Karl's shoulder. When the boy staggered backward, Lambrecht shot him point-blank, once, twice, three times, his stomach knotting with disgust. Then it was done. He had to lean against a wall, gasping. A thought rose in his mind. He began to sob. He sobbed, waiting for their steps.

Now they were coming for him. He didn't resist. He licked his lips

(Concluded on page 128)

Murder with a grim aftermath . . . and a host of strange and quite remarkable witnesses.

ride on a tiger

by . . . Arthur Porges

Monday, May 6th
10:15—10:30 A.M.

The moment Miss Westlake saw the man at her door that Monday morning, she smelled trouble. This took an exceptionally well-endowed nose, since the whole house reeked of cat. For fifteen years the fragile, mild-mannered spinster had lived there with her "family," which was the only way she ever referred to the pets—numbering, by actual count, from twenty to fifty—that shared her home.

The man on the porch was

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stout, and had a red, blotched face like something just inexpertly skinned. Miss Westlake distrusted him on sight, but was too polite to turn anybody away unheard. As the product of a small English village, she had brought her country courtesies to America, along with her love of cats, and her crisp enunciation.

"I'm Tracy Martin," the man said in a gurgly, high-pitched voice, displaying a card. "May I come in?"

"I really don't care to buy anything today," Miss Westlake objected.

"You won't have to—you're the seller." Without waiting for further permission, the visitor shouldered his way in. Before he could wrinkle his nostrils at the overpowering fragrance of tomcat, the animals themselves reacted in a spectacular fashion. One moment kittens had been frolicking; feline matrons had been sedately washing; and mature males had been relaxing in all sorts of unlikely places.

Now, as if some invisible feline bogie-man had yelled "scat!" ninety percent of the menagerie leaped, bounded, and scuttled from the room, finding any number of peculiar exits, including special holes in the very walls themselves. Only a few elder statesmen, wise and equable, remained, watching the man with enigmatic green eyes.

"Oh, dear," the old lady said in her prim, precise little voice. "You've scared them badly; strangers always do. Some won't come back until tomorrow. And I do hate to think of the poor darlings, going without supper. Such a lovely halibut."

Her visitor looked about the cluttered room, and an expression of amused incredulity appeared on his ruddy face. As if the live cats were not enough, every flat surface in the place held assorted statuary of the feline form divine. The prize piece of the collection was a shapely nude Negress astride a large tiger. The beast, made of iron, like the woman, was painted in hot black and yellow stripes. There was a crude vitality about this tasteless horror, however. An imaginative viewer could almost see the smile prepared to move from the lips of the Lady from Niger to the feral mask of her traditional mount.

"I'll come right to the point, Miss Westlake," Martin said, dropping into a big armchair.

As he sank back, unaware of having picked up several ounces of loose fur, he saw a heavy copper hurricane lamp hanging from a sturdy hook just over his head, and hastily moved the chair several feet. In this crazy room, with all sorts of weird Victorian artifacts dangling from the dusty beams above, it was safer to keep clear. There was even a large fish-

net, a tangle of messy ropes with floats, covering parts of the ceiling. Who could tell how secure those fastenings might be?

"I want to buy your house," he resumed in a firm voice, satisfied that no sword of Damocles was suspended over his bald dome.

"It's not for sale," she replied, her lips narrowing. "Everybody in the neighborhood knows that. I've been refusing offers for years."

"You won't turn *me* down," the man said airily. "After all, you can get another place easily enough. Plenty of them around." He surveyed the room again. "In fact, it'd be easier to move than clean this joint up!"

"Your manners are quite bad, young man," she snapped, "but that's a problem for others.

"No offense, Beautiful," he grinned, showing a mouthful of capped teeth. "Just sell me this palace of yours, and I'll apologize again."

"It's not that simple," she retorted, sitting down across from him. She seemed almost to vanish into one corner of the old red couch: a tiny, thin figure, with arms and legs like sticks. "Most neighborhoods won't accept my family. But around here there are Puerto Ricans and Mexicans—simple, good-natured people. I don't complain about their dozens of children, and they don't bother my pussycats. You'd be surprised how many folks are brutal to dumb animals. I couldn't take my family away from her, ever."

"I'll pay ten thousand dollars for this old shack. Believe me, that's a lot more than it's worth.'

"You still don't understand. I've refused much better offers—even years ago, when property was cheaper."

"I want to build some stores," the man confided. "This is the only corner lot I can use."

Her bluish mouth, devoid of lipstick, pursed stubbornly.

"It's not for sale. I'm sorry, Mr. Martin, but my mind is made up. I intend to live here until I die. I'm almost seventy and that's much too old to find new roots. Besides, cats are very independent. They wouldn't want to leave; it's their home. Most of them were born and reared here. They'd find their way back wherever I took them, and nobody would be here any more. I'm the only one who really cares. They have no other friends in this world."

"Everybody around these parts warned me you had a whim of iron," the man said unpleasantly. "Well, there are stronger metals, you know."

"Of course," Miss Westlake replied, smiling in a wintry way. "Pure iron is really quite soft. I used to teach physics. At the Talmadge School for Girls, in Maine. A very select institution. I left there in nineteen-forty, in order to look after more cats."

"I can make you sell this place," Martin said darkly.

Her mild eyes clouded, and became a little smaller. "I think you'd better go now, young man. Threats don't frighten me."

"Be smart and listen first." She stared at him, and he said coolly: "It's not exactly normal to live with all these damn cats. Someone with political connections—a business man like me—could talk to the Health Department, and they'd pay attention. You'd have to dispose of this zoo in a hurry, or go to jail. It's not impossible they'd commit you to an institution. You wouldn't have even one pet there.

"For that matter, I could easily get one of these 'friendly' neighbors to file the complaint; you can buy any neighbor with eight children to clothe and feed for ten dollars. I want to opensome stores here, as soon as possible; especially a place to sell cheap liquor. A guy could clean up in this neighborhood.

"I'll give you until next Thursday. If you don't accept my offer by then, I'll just have to get tough. Whatever happens, you'll lose those precious cats of yours."

He stood up, and walked to the door. "Thursday, remember." A faint smile touched his lips. It was similar to the one worn by the lady on the tiger, and equally premature. "Be sensible, old lady, and take the money." The door closed behind him.

Miss Westlake sat there, a stricken expression on her wrinkled face. A big tom jumped into her lap, to be followed by his jealous brother. She stroked them both, absently. A kitten scampered out from under the sofa, and began to chase its tail. Then, from behind Martin's chair, Marcus Aurelius, huge, grey, sober as a professor of ecclesiastical law, paced solemnly front and center.

A bit of white, the caller's card, fluttered to the floor from the woman's flaccid fingers. She sank deeper into the soft upholstery, but now her vague, misty eyes were suddenly beady and malicious, like those of a broody hen. Marcus Aurelius walked over to the card, sniffed it, and extended one limber paw, claws out. He gave the white rectangle a single contemptuous tap, and a faint rumble sounded in his thick chest.

Mr. Martin didn't know it, but his death sentence had just been confirmed.

Thursday, May 9th
1:20—1:30 P. M.

On Thursday afternoon, Mr. Martin presented himself again at Miss Westlake's door. She admitted him promptly, with a cryptic smile, and seemed resigned to her defeat. The nineteen or more cats in the room were no more stoical at his visit than before, and exited singly or in groups, so that he saw

little but streaks of colored fur. There was no doubt, he reflected, that these pets were even more neurotic than their mistress, and regarded every other human as an enemy of the whole feline race.

"Have you thought about my offer?" Martin demanded, seating himself in the armchair. He tried first, however, to brush away an assortment of cat hairs, but without avail. They seemed part of the upholsery by now. As he'd been forced to do last Monday, he'd have to go over this suit with a stiff brush later. It was some relief, though, to glance up and see nothing formidably heavy over his head—nothing but fishnet and cordage strung out in completely harmless fashion.

The room, of course, was still wonderously cluttered. He must have missed that huge stack of magazines by the alcove during his earlier visit. Miss Westlake had read detective stories for years; in fact, there was, buried in a drawer of her bedroom bureau a laboriously hand-written manuscript entitled "The Case of the Albino Cat."

Mr. Martin, knowing nothing of these little eccentricities, sank back with a sigh, convinced that his business would soon be satisfactorily concluded. In this he was quite correct, as long as the identity of the satisfied party remained unspecified.

"Are you sure that it has to be *my* house—that you won't reconsider and leave me here in peace with my family?" Miss Westlake said, standing squarely in front of him, her faded blue eyes wide and mournful.

"I'm positive. I need a corner lot—this particular one. So let's quit playing games. I'm a busy man. Either you take my money right now—and not a cent more; no haggling—or I declare war on your cats. They tell me the medical schools need pussies like these very badly." It was lucky, he reflected with some complacence, that she had this Achilles heel. Otherwise nothing in the world would have made her budge, the old kook.

"I just can't risk your hurting my family," she sighed. "So you win. I'll get the deed right now. Please excuse me for a minute."

"That's very sensible," he said.

She left the room, and went down the long, shabby hall that led to the back of the house. Mr. Martin hummed softly to himself, well pleased. Her resistance had crumbled more easily than he'd dared to expect. The advantage in getting ay a person's weak spot—the soft underbelly. Let's see; a two story building; big liquor store on the first floor; those foreigners would spend all their pay on the cheap stuff; red wine or whiskey.

He was so immersed in the warm, pleasant bath of future profits, that he didn't even notice a

significant omission in the display of statuary. The Lady from Niger and her dangerous steed were no longer in view.

Meanwhile, Miss Westlake, at the end of the hall, found a sharp paring knife in the kitchen. She removed her low-heeled shoes, and in stocking feet crept back down the long corridor to the living room entrance. The man still sat there, his back to her. He was humming a gay little air. She reached up with the keen blade . . .

Thursday, May 9th
2:00—5:00 P.M.

At two o'clock on Thursday the police received a call from Miss Westlake, and hurried to her house. The cats had all been shooed out before the squad cars arrived. She hated to evict her pets, even temporarily, but it was for their own benefit. Officialdom was best left in ignorance as to the number of animals sharing the establishment with her. The smell couldn't be helped; but three or four cats for a year can create the same potent atmosphere as twenty, so that no suspicions needed to be aroused.

The police found a very dead man, slumped forward half out of the armchair. His skull had been shattered by a mighty blow from something extremely heavy. To be specific, it was an iron statuette which the murderer must have wielded using the slender figure of the Negress as a handle, and bashing the rectangular base against the victim's head.

Detective Sergeant Henry Howard, after futilely dusting it for prints, hefted the thing with some effort, and decided that the killer was either a gorilla in its prime, or professional weight lifter of Olympic caliber. He was husky himself, as an ex-football star, but hadn't the muscle to swish the figurine through the air with enough force to achieve the appalling damage accomplished by the murderer. The late Mr. Martin's skull was a mess.

The Coroner came, too, and found that the cause of death was definitely a blow struck with the iron statuette. The edge of the base neatly fitted fragments of the victim's occipital bones. There was no doubt it had made the indentations found on them.

When it came time for Miss Westlake to explain her part in the killing, there was little enough she could tell.

"He was trying to buy my house," she said. "Of course, I didn't want to sell, but Mr. Martin persisted. When he came back today, I hated to turn the poor man down too rudely, so I went back to make him a cup of my special English tea. I heard a few faint noises, and even thought for a minute that there was some whispering. I didn't pay much attention,

but then there was this tremendous thump, and when I came back to the living room to investigate, it was simply terrible. Mr. Martin was sitting there, just the way you see him now, all bloody; and whoever did it was gone—vanished.

The neighbors were questioned, but none of them had seen a second man enter the house. The Perez family did testify to hearing a mighty thud, as if something very heavy had fallen, but that was all.

Sergeant Howard was no fool, and knew that Miss Westlake ought to be his most likely suspect. But one glance at those thin, arthritic arms, and he knew that no jury would believe them capable of swinging a thirty-pound statuette of iron. Why should they when he couldn't swallow that explanaton himself. The tiny woman couldn't weight more than ninety pounds herself wearing a wet overcoat. It was all very puzzling . . .

So the second man was never found, in spite of the most intensive search. For many weeks every weight-lifter and athlete in the area was given a bad time, and all for nothing. But it couldn't be proved that no such person existed, either; for there was the usual rash of stories about large, sinister strangers in the neighborhood—gentlemen who always turned out to be exemplary citizens. And certainly Mr. Martin had more than his share of enemies, having been a ruthless operator for years.

If the City of Willowbrook had possessed a Department of Dead Ends, it would have placed therein the statuette of the Lady from Niger. But it had only a few skimpy files, and the Martin case remained open for many years—years—years during which kittens became cats; old queens passed to their rewards; and were finally joined, at the age of eighty-three, by Miss Westlake herself. The murderer of Tracy Martin was never found.

Wednesday, May 8th
1:00—5:00 P.M.

(For the truth about this case, the reader must return to these earlier dates. This one takes us to the day before Mr. Martin's return visit.)

Miss Westlake sat in the big armchair, thinking. Two hours went by, during which eight different cats fought for and acquired briefly the heaven of her bony lap. Her large, near-sighted, mild eyes slipped restlessly from one part of the room to another, seeking the final steps in her solution to the Problem of the Pesky Buyer. They settled, eventually, with satisfaction on the Lady from Niger. That would do, she thought. It was heavy enough to be quite convincing.

She got up, first removing two black kittens and their plump

mother. In the cluttered garage, which had never known a car, but had been a maternity hospital for countless cats, the old woman found a battered trunk, a souvenir of her last year as a teacher. She raised the heavy top, panting a little. Yes, there they were, just as she'd recalled. Two multiple pulleys and the nylon parachute cord, so slick and tough. A real prize in 1944, when things were hard to get.

She brought the assembly to the house. Her fingers were stiff and arthritic, but still knowledgeable; so it took only thirty-five minutes to rig the light, simple block-and-tackle, giving a mechanical advantage of six to one. The same combination had served her well that final semester of physics at the Talmadge School for Girls. With it, even a frail person like herself, could handle a weight of fifty pounds or more quite easily.

Watched by a dozen pairs of opalescent eyes, she fastened one end of the assembly to the hook in the ceiling, first removing and hiding the brass lamp. Using the block-and-tackle with slow, cautious efficiency, she suspended the statuette at just the right height so that when swung in an arc from a length of heavy cord, it would sail over the armchair from behind, some six inches above the back. That was where the bald, pinkish skull of her enemy had been when he sat down.

Now she took a length of clothesline, tied it loosely to the waist of the Negress, led the slack to a hook in the wall, and using the block-and-tackle again, with even less effort, since this was no longer a direct lift, pulled the iron figurine back to the side of the room. She used a second, short piece of rope to tie the massive thing to a hook in the panelling.

What she had now was a thirty-pound pendulum bob—the statue—swinging from a hook approximately above the chair, ceiling-high, drawn back and tied to the wall alongside the door leading to the corridor. The suspension rope swept in a tight catenary curve from overhead hook to the side of the room, but was inconspicuous amid the jungle of ropes from the fishnets and their glass floats.

As for the figurine against the wall, that had to be hidden, so she draped over it an old Spanish shawl bought fifty years ago in Madrid. Marcus Aurelius, purring loudly, rubbed himself against one fleshless ankle. He approved the arrangements.

Thursday, May 9th
1:30—2:00 P.M.

. . . the keen knife came forward. Her other hand silently whisked away the shawl, leaving the massive statuette straining against the rope that bound it to the wall. She gave a last quick

glance at the unsuspecting man, still humming softly. A single decisive stroke of the sharp blade, and swinging in a noiseless, deadly arc, the great mass of iron swooped through the air to meet Martin's skull with an impact that almost flung him from the armchair. He never knew what killed him.

Miss Westlake, her eyes wide and glowing, waited until the amplitude of the swing, barely disturbed by contact of the weight with the victim's head, had dropped to a foot, and then, with meticulous timing, sliced the rope that circled the waist of the Lady from Niger. The figurine fell to the floor with a hollow boom, sending nine cats streaking from the room in a panic.

In another twenty minutes, the old lady had removed all traces of the murder. The parts of the block-and-tackle assembly were under a pile of junk in a closet; the brass lamp was back in its place.

Before calling the police, however, she coaxed or bullied roughly two dozen cats out of the house. Marcus Aurelius, patriarch of the family, was permitted to stay. He was unable, of course, to speak, but even if this had not been so, Miss Westlake had perfect faith in his discretion.

A FATHER'S DUTY by Curtis W. Casewit

(Concluded from page 119)

and told them what had happened.

After they led him away, a rookie asked: "You understand his motive?

"I do."

"Sort of European, huh?"

"That's right," said the older detective. "Continental like a Vendetta. Or a duel. A matter of honor to him. And killing was the only way. A father's duty. And he did it."

"Then why did he cry his heart out?"

"He realized he should've done his duty earlier. By being a real father. When Karl was a kid!"

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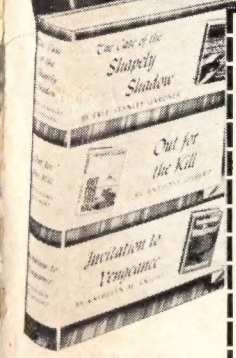

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2 The Case of the WAYLAID WOLF
When Perry Mason helps pretty Arlene Ferris fight for *her* life, he also fights for his OWN life!

3 The Case of the SINGING SKIRT
A luscious young gambling hostess gets Perry into such hot water that the D.A. charges him with being an accessory to murder!

4 The Case of the MYTHICAL MONKEYS
A winter's eve with a corpse in a remote cabin. Perry hasn't a *ghost* of a chance of solving THIS murder!

5 The Case of the DEADLY TOY
A routine "crank" investigation leads to a warrant for Perry's arrest—on a KIDNAPPING charge!

6 The Case of the CALENDAR GIRL
To save his client, Perry builds an air-tight murder case against Dawn Manning. Now *she's* on trial and Perry is *her* lawyer!

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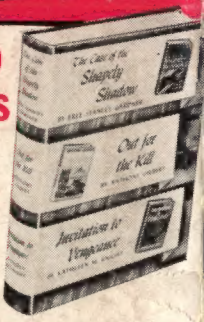

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